Here Be Dragons: Performing Virtual Embodiment, Social Conduct, and Racial Imaginaries in *World of Warcraft*

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Dedication

To my husband, Christopher Weiss. I could not ask for a more supportive gaming partner or life partner.

And...

To my grandfather, Herbert Johnson, who sacrificed so much for his family's achievements. This project's completion is a promise fulfilled.

Abstract

This dissertation examines the performance of racial identity in the long-running, fantastical multiplayer online role-playing game *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*) and its role in shaping digital embodiment, guiding player conduct, and maintaining white racial hegemony in the virtual play space. As a space where players devise, build, and perform digital characters to play fictional scenarios, *WoW* is the world's largest form of participatory theatre. While this space provides a form of immersive escapism, it also asks players to emotionally invest in a narrative that reactivates the problematic racial imaginary of 19th century imperial modernity. Through the methodologies of cultural criticism and autoethnography, this dissertation investigates three components of *WoW*'s gaming environment: the narrative devices that shape a player's avatarial identity, the process of embodying a gendered and racialized virtual character, and the structural design of a gaming system that encourages players to perform white, heteronormative, hypermasculine, and neoliberal capitalist behaviors online or acquiesce to operating within a space that defines itself along such lines.

The project focuses on the development of racially coded and narratively complex virtual bodies and analyzes how avatarial embodiment shapes player perceptions of self, race, and gender online. It relies on the concept of the interaction continuum, a term that describes the overlap between the social, virtual-active, and real worlds that form the game space, and stresses the importance of online sociality as the locus of the game's value. This study also utilizes the concept of governmentality to describe how the game designers structure knowledge of and about *WoW*'s citizenry such that small player

populations govern themselves, but within the strictures of the game's digital code and the context of its fantastical yet whitewashed narrative. My analysis demonstrates that ludic online culture not only shapes player behavior in the role-playing space of a game, but also alters how players interact with one another in less narrative virtual social spaces.

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"Every age has its storytelling form, and video gaming is a huge part of our culture. You can ignore or embrace video games and imbue them with the best artistic quality. People are enthralled with video games in the same way as other people love the cinema or theatre."

Actor Andy Serkis, Interview in *The Guardian*

November 8, 2010

"For all the talk about the merging of film and video game, and for all its inevitability, perhaps the secret of true convergence lies not in an external reality, but in an internal truth: What kids seek from video games is what we all seek from our own distractions--be they movies, radio, comic books, literature, or art: an escape from the mundane to the sublime, where our imaginations make of us heroes, lovers, warriors, and gods."

Devin C. Griffiths, in *Virtual Ascendance: Video Games and the Remaking of Reality*

I have spent the last nine years of my life involved with, in some shape or form, the popular Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game *World of Warcraft* (*WoW*)—seven of those years as an active (and sometimes over-active) player and community member. *World of Warcraft* is a sandbox game world in which players role

play heroic fantasy characters in an extensive virtual environment in real time. The game has just begun its tenth year as the leader of its genre and will launch its fifth expansion in November 2014. At its height it had over 12 million players—though it now boasts a more humble 7.5 million—and has defined the MMO genre since its launch in 2004. Despite being a space of play, this multi-modal game environment hosts thousands of small, active communities called guilds that define the game's value through their generation of social capital. *World of Warcraft*, then, is just as real a space for its players as social environments in the physical world. *WoW* is not just a game. Its interactions hold a weight that marks this particular virtual site as an intriguing space to study how identities are shaped into a new set of social standards. There is an impressive body of critical analysis in cultural studies that demands that we look beyond dismissals of broader popular culture as "just entertainment". However, arguments that virtual game spaces are unworthy of or immune to analysis die hard among player populations—particularly in the wake of the Fall/Winter 2014 "Gamer Gate" online attacks against those who work with video games as sites of critical inquiry. This leads me to reiterate that online games are far more than entertainment: they are social spaces with long histories that build upon "real world" models of economics, culture, racial politics, and world events, in which players shape new identities.

Video games are by no means a new form of entertainment. They have played a role in entertaining the masses since the early 1970s with Atari's release of the breakout hit "Pong". Despite the industry's ups and downs, video games entered a golden age in the 21st century with the reboot of the home gaming console (Play Station, XBox, and

Nintendo) and the explosion of PC gaming. Now more than ever, video games are an ever increasing source of entertainment worldwide. To put matters in perspective, it might help to understand that, according to anthropologist Lisa Galarneau, video games have experienced a 9% growth over the past year and surpassed movie industry box office sales some time ago. Today, video game development companies profit over $24 billion dollars per year as opposed to the movie industry's $10.5 billion. As of 2014, 58% of Americans play video games on either gaming consoles from Sony, Microsoft, or Nintendo, personal computers, or mobile devices. The average player is an adult in his/her 30s and plays for eight or more hours a week. 45% of gamers are now female. Games have become where millions of people experience their most consistent and enduring communities and bonds, where they learn new skills, and where they engage actively and imaginatively in narrative, scenically rendered worlds. They have become a presence in our classrooms, our hospitals, our homes, and our parents' homes, incorporating themselves into nearly every aspect of our lives from fitness to task management.

As such a pervasive part of the American experience, a number of scholars have analyzed our experiences within them. From the beginning, many of these works asked questions about the development of digital identity (Sherry Turkle's *The Second Self: Computers and the Human Spirit* and Rosanne Stone's *The War of Desire and Technology at the End of the Mechanical Age* come to mind). Others, such as James Gee, concentrated their energies on theorizing how learning takes place in these virtual spaces (*Video Games and Embodiment)*. Still others, such as Edward Castronova (*Exodus to the*

Virtual World) and Nick Dyer-Witheford and Greig de Peuter (*Games of Empire: Global Capitalism and Video Games*) have focused on the economic consequences of digital life, inspired by the ability of these games to model real-world markets with small populations. I have drawn on all three of these modes of inquiry for my own analysis of video games and have focused my attention on the MMO, or massively multiplayer online role-playing game, *World of Warcraft* as a space of immersive performance.

This project examines the acceptable parameters of performance within the communities of *World of Warcraft* and how those limits are shaped by game narrative and design. I specifically focus on how narrative and design influence the motivations and goals a player naturalizes, how they empathize with their chosen character's storyline, how it reshapes their understanding of race to match a more outmoded 19th century understanding of the term, and how it forces players to form a relationship to the game and to activities ostensibly defined as play that are white, male, and capitalist.

This project analyzes *WoW's* racial pedagogies, focusing on how the game divides those encoded avatars into factions of light bodies and dark bodies who are at war with one another. Players perform their roles as participants in a long-running, colonial race war and embody characters coded as Other or as white, while simultaneously engaging with one another in small, cooperative communities that function as supportive, third sector agencies within the larger governing structure of the game. The guild, as a space of sociality in which players perform a version of selfhood that most closely resembles their real-world identities that the adopted mores and motivations of their in-game avatars, serves as the meeting space of the real and the virtual. As such, players

necessarily draw upon both their real-world ideologies and their adopted/naturalized in-game ideologies when interacting with other players in this space—an act that often causes these various identities to abrade against the game's racial logic. I argue that *WoW* promotes typically Western ideals of capitalist productivity and self-governance and that it relies on these structures to teach the player how to perform as an ideal citizen within the game within specific parameters of conduct: How it trains players to read real-world race into fantasy bodies and environments; how it trains players to inhabit those bodies and naturalize the motivations of the game's narrative; and how it trains players to perform as efficient and productive efficient economic forces AND supportive community members; and how these pedagogies shape player conduct in such a way that the motivations and goals of the active play space slip into guild interaction and real-world interact. *World of Warcraft* trains players to perform in or acquiesce to a space of whiteness that is both unwelcoming and threatening to those who do not or cannot learn to conform.

I began playing *WoW* shortly before beginning work on my Master's degree in 2005, so my progress as a player mirrored, in many ways, my progression through graduate school and my introduction to critical theory. As a result, this project emerged from a series of questions that developed as I began to recognize problematic cultural formations within the game world itself. This project is therefore part autoethnography and part cultural analysis, viewed through the lenses of critical race and performance theories. The autoethnographic portions of this study are my own, embedded perspective as a long-time *WoW* player and therefore include highly personal anecdotes of my own

experiences within the game space as well as some limited interviews. The cultural analysis segments of my work rely on the rapidly growing body of theatre and performance scholarship that studies both virtual worlds and virtuality as forms of performativity as well as the vast collection of new media research on video games and *World of Warcraft* in particular. However, much of this scholarship analyzes the virtual in a way that focuses on its aesthetic performance interventions and the technology's place in live or hybridized theatre, such as Josephine Machon's work on the immersive, virtual creations of Blast Theory or Sue-Ellen Case's analysis of the performance and representation of gender in early online spaces. By contrast, I rely on performance scholarship to analyze how video games and virtual embodiment shape conduct—particularly naturalized, social conduct—in immersive spaces.

I should pause here to mark my own racial and cultural identity, as my study of *WoW* weaves together both the politics of the game's creators and of its players—myself included—and alters my own readings of race and racism within the game space. I am a young(ish), educated, liberal woman of mixed racial background. I spent my youth openly identifying as mixed-race as my heritage is a mixture of Japanese, Lebanese, Anglo-Saxon, Norman, and Native-American bloodlines (a fact that was a point of pride in my genealogically minded family growing up, so much so that we can name the quarters and sixteenths that make the whole). I believe I identified as such partly to mark my Otherness in the largely Hispanic culture of my hometown; in retrospect this was a problematic move. In my desire to mark myself as racially "special", I obfuscated and ignored the obvious advantages I received through race and class privilege while residing

within a minority, working class community . However, I have been visually identified by others as white since puberty(my Japanese heritage was more obvious in my youth and has softened over time). I have enjoyed white privilege my entire life, rarely suffering the consequences of my mixed background unless I happened to openly identify my heritage in front of a person with obvious racial bias (which was rare). I speak with a standard mid-Western dialect, enjoyed a middle-class American childhood, and suffered no the institutional consequences as a result of my racial background. I did not name the advantages of my racial passing until I was well into my 20s (already an established *WoW* player), and it was only at that time that I ceased to claim my "mixed-race" identity—a moniker to which I felt I had no right. I believe that attuning myself to identity politics at a young age may have allowed me to view race and racism differently than those with white privilege who may not have struggled to define themselves as Other from a young age. My experience of my own shifting identity politics, then directly affected my performance of race and, later, gender in the online space and was a frequent source of conflict. I found myself unwilling and unable to mask my normally brash and outspoken personality with a more acceptable performance of white femininity (which while online seemed to be defined as mild-mannered and non-confrontational). I also observed others dealing with similar issues, struggling to conform to the social expectations of the guild space and failing to do so. I did not initially recognize these failures as an inability to adhere to the unspoken rules of performance in the online space, but assumed there was something wrong with me (and perhaps there was as well). As I continued to play through quests and attend guild raids, I began to question the systems

that sought to shape my behavior online, in particular my performance of race and racial awareness.

I played *World of Warcraft* for several years before exploring it as a space of academic inquiry, so this project arose from an inciting incident that predates my autoethnographic research proper. I refer to a moment that, in hindsight, demonstrates not only the trauma of online social conflict, but how the guild space can shape conduct in problematic ways. In early 2008 I was told to voluntarily leave guild that I had been active member and officer of for nearly three years or be forcibly removed. I had spent my free hours (and a few of the hours that were supposed to be spent reading and studying) with this digital community that I had carried from Florida to Texas to Minnesota and had chatted, played, and warred with these friends nearly every evening. My guild was a security blanket, providing familiarity and camaraderie in my still-unfamiliar new home in Minneapolis. I was shocked when these apparently fickle friends informed me that I had become a disruptive force within the guild, and that several officers had agreed that my tenure as a junior leader in in my guild was at an end. I was legitimately perplexed by their claims of my dissidence: Sure, I was overly boisterous, outspoken, and at times lacking in social graces, but so were 90% of the men in the guild. However, my occasionally unfeminine behavior was only part of the problem; the larger issue was my desire to uphold the values that the guild claimed to hold—claims of equality, of being a welcoming space, and of policing offensive, racist, or sexist behavior. These values were a part of our published guild manifesto. I failed to note that in practice the guild was more interested in providing a non-threatening space of socialization and

play for its primarily male, white guild membership rather than a space where all guild members felt accepted. The incident that led to my unceremonious removal from my guild originated from a conversation in which I, as a junior guild officer, attempted to reshape another player's undesirable behavior in a public space.

One Inciting Incident

This project arose out of the confusing surrounding a specific incident that I experienced as a dedicated player of the game. After playing for four years and being a dedicated and productive member of a single guild for nearly three years, I was asked to leave my guild. The reason for my dismissal was clear: I was considered a disruptive force and several of the guild's junior leaders had requested that I be "booted" unceremoniously. The catalyst for this vitriolic response to my apology letter was an argument that I had with another officer (Kanterthen) in the main guild chat room. The conversation initially did not involve Kanterthen at all, but rather evolved from a request I made of another player:

> Zoolander: Man we gettin jewed in WSG today.
>
> Aktobe (me): Zoo, can you not use that phrase? It's kinda racist.
>
> Zoolander: Naw.
>
> Aktobe: Yeah. It's an old phrase. It refers to the times with Jews were the primary money lenders in Europe. Christians reviled them for lending money for profit.
>
> Zoolander: I didnt know that. Kay. Gettin screwed then?
>
> Aktobe: That's fine! :)

Kanterthen: Ur the racist Aktobe.

Aktobe: Huh?

Kanterthen: Ur [sic] the fuckin racist. Tellin him where the phrase comes from just spreads that knowledge around. If you want it to go away so bad, stop talkin about it.

Aktobe: I'm sorry. You're telling me that educating someone on where a racist phrase comes from MAKES me a racist? That's stupid.

Kanterthen: Ur the stupid one. If you don't like how he talks, why don't you leave?

Zoolander: Leave me out of this man.

What would have initially been a short and civil exchange between Zoolander and me quickly became a full-blown fight with many rude things "shouted" in all caps in the public chat room. While I was within my rights and the defined duties of an officer to politely correct Zoolander on his behavior, I had apparently lit a fuse elsewhere in the guild.

As depressing and shaming as it was to have my social network ripped from me in the middle of settling into a new city, I didn't realize how important this particular incident was until several years later. I came to realize that I had experienced more than just a chance encounter with an unenlightened individual; what I had experienced was a policing of my behavior in an attempt to preserve the sanctity of the white space of the game. The more I considered the consequences of leaving the guild, the more I understood that *WoW*, while ostensibly an anonymous digital space that is free of the

constraints of gender of race, and premised on representations of racial diversity within the game, encourages players to perform as white or acquiesce to a space of whiteness and permits player to punish those who fail to perform within those parameters. The game's narrative fits within a larger history of white/Other conflict, and players invest in a story that reifies white superiority in highly problematic ways.

I have chosen to intervene in this process by analyzing not only how *WoW* establishes itself as a space of white hypermasculinity, but how the components of the game—the interwoven mechanisms of how players interact/don't interact, how they advance characters, how they accrue markers of success, and how they learn the rules of this space—create an environment that demands specific performances across a variety of modes of interaction. I consider each of these interactions separately and as a whole, concentrating on the cultural space of the guild and its role in creating player performances that perpetuate a "locker-room mentality" of jocularity that demands players perform a politics of identity that may or may not be a part of their real world lives.

A Warcraft Primer

In order to understand the site that I am analyzing, it is necessary to have a basic knowledge of the game itself. Summarizing the game is no easy task, despite the fine examples of other *World of Warcraft* scholars before me. Because the space is a world complete--a simulation that mimics, in many ways, the world around us in the most foundational ways--this summary will only touch on many aspects of the game and

exclude others entirely. I have, however, attempted to give an impression of the fullness of life in *WoW* and the complexity of the various overlapping modes of interaction available to the player. This description covers a brief history of the game's narrative, a discussion of social life in *WoW*, and an explanation of the most basic description of how a player interacts with the game interface.

We can trace *World of Warcraft*'s origins to its real-time strategy precursor, *Warcraft: Orcs vs. Humans* (1994) and its sequels, *Warcraft II: Tides of Darkness* (1996) and *Warcraft III: Reign of Chaos* (2002). These three games were essentially digitized board games in which players built a base, built an army, and destroyed an enemy, but the games provide the narrative backbone of *World of Warcraft.* The game development company Blizzard Entertainment produced these early games alongside two other popular series, *StarCraft* and *Diablo,* each of which were great successes in their own right. In 1999, Blizzard began development of a massively multiplayer online role playing game (MMORPG) in order to build on the success of both their *Warcraft* series and the first successful MMOs, Sony's *EverQuest*. They released the product of their efforts in 2004 in the form of *World of Warcraft*.

The new MMO released on the 10th anniversary of the franchise; Blizzard quickly rocketed to the top position in video game development sales as the game was an instant success. *WoW* won several awards including *PC Game of the Year* and quickly amassed an incredibly loyal base of subscribers who paid a monthly fee for access to the game. In the past nine years, *WoW* has released four expansions to the game that added to both its extensive narrative and to the size of the game world. In 2010 the game boasted

over 12 million players, making it the largest game of *any* type in the world and the second largest discrete virtual world.[1] Though as of 2014 the game's active subscriber base has dropped to a mere 7 million, it remains the most popular MMO on the market. The November 2014 release of its fifth expansion, *Warlords of Draenor*, promises to refresh the franchise in such a way that will attract more subscribers. To date, Blizzard has made over 10 billion dollars from its flagship game through direct sales of the game software, subscription fees, affiliated merchandise, and character migration fees.

WoW is a real-time game with a focus on action, adventure, and exploration. Players explore a large world comprise of several continents on foot and, later, on walking (such as horses) and flying mounts (such as dragons). During their explorations, Non-Player Characters (NPCs) assign the players short missions, or quests, that introduce them to the dynamics of the world around them. Many of these quests require gathering a specific number of an item, killing a specific number of an item, escorting an NPC out of a dangerous area, or visiting another NPC to hear a piece of the game's extensive narrative. Quests usually trigger follow-ups, building quest chains that lead the character around an area of the map. Completing quests and killing beasts or hostile NPCs grants the player experience points and allows them to level up. Leveling up will, in turn, grant the player's avatar more health, more power ("mana") or stamina (rage or "energy"), and a boost in other passive traits (strength, intelligence, spirit, etc.), all quantified attributes that constitute the "value" of the character in the game world.

[1] *Second Life* had more subscribers at its peak but its creators at Linden Lab emphatically state that it is an "entirely open-ended experience", not a game with conflict or objectives. (Kaining nbcnews.com)

WoW's bases its game dynamic on character progression. Players concentrate their efforts on continually perfecting their avatars. For the first few weeks or months of game play, players improve by exploring the world and gaining experience points. However, once players have reached the highest character level of the game (level cap), self-improvement relies on the acquisition of goods such as armor and weapons, currency in the form of gold, and social capital in the form of a ranked guild. The guild is a social group within the game that provides support through player leadership, serving as a kind of voluntary organization that generates knowledge and ensures that its members are efficient and productive members of the game society at large. Throughout the leveling and playing-at-cap process, players engage one another in order to chat, form small raiding parties, and (at level 35 and upward) defeat dungeons full of difficult game bosses. Players may additionally choose to engage in the player-versus-player (PvP) realm of the game's sanctioned battlegrounds. Battlegrounds are timed rounds of capture the flag and king of the hill (or variations on these themes) and provide the character with "honor points" that may be used as an in-game currency. Between various modes of play--exploration, questing, raids, dungeons, battlegrounds, and social interaction--players are rarely at a loss for things to do in the game.

I should also explain that *World of Warcraft* divides the heavily populated game into separate servers (shard or realm) in order to optimize the game's performance. A single server can handle about six thousand players at once, but servers have the ability to interact with one another. Raiding parties, which are smaller player groups often drawn from the upper ranks of a guild, *can* (but usually do not) gather players across many

servers; battlegrounds, which are separate areas where small groups of 10-25 players face off in a game of Capture the Flag or King of the Hill, will generally form around two "Battle Groups" (a small collection of servers). Blizzard designates each shard as Player vs. Player (PvP), Player vs. Environment (PvE), Role-playing Player vs. Environment (RP), or Role-Playing Player vs. Player (RP-PvP). The primary distinctions that I need to make here are that PvP environments allow enemy players to attack you at all times in neutral or contested territory (though not in sanctuary territories such as capital cities) while PvE servers will "flag" a player as friendly while traveling through the environment. Role-playing versions of these servers encourage players to act out their characters online (i.e.: speak and behave as their Troll or Dwarf might, but make no reference to their physical selves). My experiences with the game have taken place solely on PvE servers, which means that my ethnographic field notes are not clouded with a fear of attack, nor are the performances of character as theatrical as they might be in either a PvP or RP server, respectively.[2] PvE servers are the default server type for new players, but I opted to remain on my server because the acting component of the RP servers added an additional element of theatricalized performance on top of an already complex analysis of the naturalized performance of identity politics. My project relies on English-speaking, US-based servers of the *World of Warcraft* franchise, however a large portion of the game's players are located on servers in Europe and China. Beyond this project, I

[2] My limited time on a RP server convinced me that playing in such a space would be annoying more than theatrical as player performances are limited by the game's code. Role-playing in this space tends to rely on emotes--typed commands such as "/yell", "/say", "clap", "dance", or "fart". The games chat panel was filled with these demonstrative texts, disabling my ability to keep track of world events or conversations. However, player performances in these spaces also reflect a player's interpretation of character. It is interesting to observe Trolls in particular on these realms as their Jamaican accents (a designer decision) tend to produce an incredibly offensive player portrayal of character.

hope that this discussion will prompt further analysis of the culture of non -US servers around the world and their roles as spaces of racial formation.

While *WoW* is largely a visual medium, it is helpful to understand the roles voice and text and play within the game. *WoW* makes use of a floating chat panel to disseminate world-wide announcements and facilitate player-to-player communication. Like Internet Relay Chat (IRC), an application that contains multiple chat rooms, *WoW*'s floating chat display has a series of channels that the player may join. They communicate such events as enemy raids on home cities or those looking to make a trade transaction outside of the auction house. The most important channels, however, are the Guild, Friend, and Whisper channels. The Guild channel allows players to communicate with all of the players in their guild social group and is displayed in green. Whispered messages are private communications between players and appear in pink. The Friend channel, which is an advent of the *Mists of Pandaria* expansion, appears in blue and allows players who have exchanged user names to communicate with one another privately. These various chats mean that a player is never wandering through the world disconnected from others--they are always able to reach out and communicate with someone, even if they choose to simply "shout" (red text) to anyone in the immediate area. Most guilds also make use of Voice-over-Internet Protocol (VOIP) services such as Ventrilo or TeamSpeak. These applications, which operate externally from the game and whose subscriptions are usually paid for by a guild leader, operate much like the in-game text service. Each has a series of "rooms" that a player can join; s/he can then talk to other guild mates in a conference call using a microphone and headset. I spent the majority of

my time in-game connected to multiple guild members via TeamSpeak and often utilized the chat service to carry on two or three conversations *while* talking with other members online and playing the game. As a result, my *WoW* experience was often punctuated by my conversations with online friends. It was rare for me to decide to disconnect from both the chat service and the VOIP service while online, though many other players chose to do so when playing from work or school. Figure 1.1 below is a partial screenshot of the user-interface with floating chat panel and Aktobe in the foreground.

Figure 1.1: Floating chat panel (background: Aktobe in Orgrimmar)

Figure 1.2: Character Creation Screen (Night Elf, Alliance)

The character creation process within *WoW* allows for players to customize their characters within narrowly defined parameters. After choosing a faction (Horde or Alliance), a race (dependent upon faction), and a class (dependent upon race), players are allowed to tweak five character attributes: skin color, face, hair style, hair color, and facial hair or piercings (Fig. 1.2). Each of these attributes has nine options for the player to choose from; s/he cannot customize beyond those options. At the end of this process, the player chooses a name and enters a level 1 starting zone. I explain the character creation process from my own perspective in greater detail in Chapter 2, but what is important to note about this process is that player choice is an illusion during creation. With such narrowly defined parameters, avatars are guaranteed to fit into a specific game aesthetic; there is no room to for an exploration of an avatar's features beyond the

choices the game gives the player, nor does the player have the ability to use their avatar in a transgressive or boundary crossing way.

Blizzard is an innovative company and, as such, the game is in a state of continual evolution and renewal. With four expansions and seven years of gaming experience to draw on, it is difficult for me to pinpoint the date of emergence for some components of the game. While I have tried in most cases to approximate shifts by naming their expansion, I have not succeeded in doing so for every game reference. This is not because the information is unavailable--the player-created and maintained site *WoWwiki.com* provides detailed information on the release date of most game changes (generally by date of patch release).[3] However, there are so many changes both large and small between each patch (and sweeping changes after each expansion) that the archival research required to name each change could fill a research paper on its own. The reader should understand that my study uses sites of the four available expansions (in order, *The Burning Crusade, Wrath of the Lich King,* and *Cataclysm)* and references a few changes from the fourth (*Mists of Pandaria*). I have not, however, played the game for over two years and therefore have little direct experience with *Mists* outside of a brief entry into the game's beta release, so references to narrative will necessarily avoid this most recent expansion.[4] Individual chapters in this study will further explanation any necessary references from the game world.

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[3] *WoWwiki.com* is not the only archival site of this type, but it is the most comprehensive and well-maintained.

[4] A beta release is a limited release that games companies use to test for bugs. It is a near-final version of the game, but will generally not allow a player to progress beyond a certain point. Beta access generally lasts only a few weeks in *WoW* expansions.

Modes

My research centers around what I have termed the *interaction continuum*, a visualization of the way players experience the game world. The continuum operates as overlapping realms of experience while in the game; the real, the social, and what I call the virtual-active (Fig. 1.3). I have employed a simple Venn diagram to represent these overlapping realms, with the center of the diagram as the nexus where online inhabitants (usually) dwell. Players may focus more fully on one realm depending on their chosen activity at any given time, but each realm relies on the others for its existence.

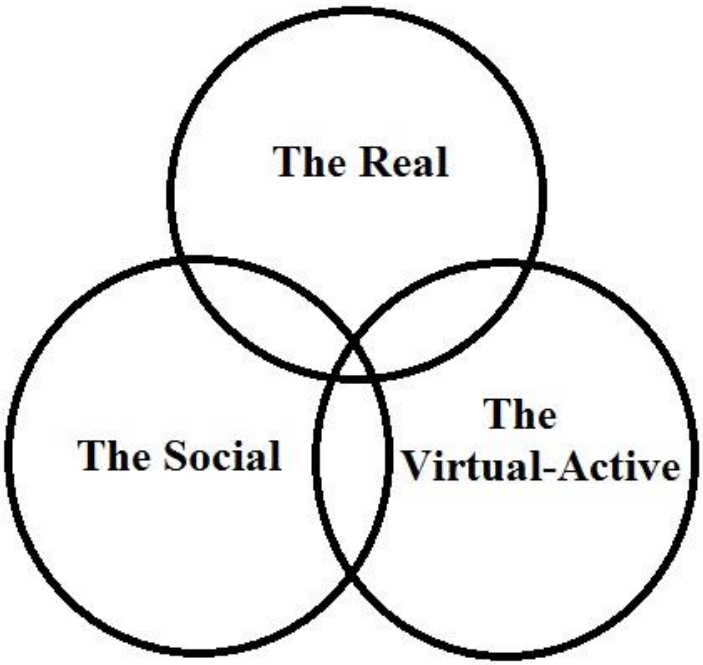

Figure 1.3: The Interaction Continuum

The **real** refers to the physical world in which we exist every day and the physical bodies with which we experience that world. In particular, it references the ideologies

that we form in the real world from our immediate environments--our attitudes toward race, gender, sex, education, and other political ideologies as influenced by our own educations through human interaction and the media. The **virtual-active** is the world that the player enters when s/he embodies her/his avatar. It is the space where the player completes quests, battles enemies, and generally engages the narrative of the game-world. The **social** realm resides between the two and serves as a sort of portal between the two realms. The social realm refers to the conversations and interactions that the player has with other players, usually within a guild chat room or voice-over internet (VOIP) conference call. The social realm is persistent--it follows the player wherever s/he may go in the form of a floating chat box in the corner of their screen or through the audio that s/he hears while wandering the virtual environment. While it is possible to play the game and disconnect from VOIP conversations or ignore texts, players must still encounter other players in the online space. The social space is therefore near-constant in the game.

I have mapped the interaction continuum in order to demonstrate that the ideologies of one space can easily slip into the other. Players enter the virtual-active realm with already formed ideas of how the world around them functions (including how they should interact and socialize and how to deal or not with race). However, *WoW* has created ideologies of its own, many of which are a part of a distinctly 19th century racial imaginary. As players move through the immersive game space and naturalize the mores and motivations of their character in that world, they are also interacting with other players in the social realm. This project examines how players perform an outmoded racial imaginary in the social realm.

Methods

My discussions of *WoW* come first and foremost from my experiences as a player in the game. I was an active subscriber of the game from the summer of 2005 until shortly before the launch of *Mists of Pandaria* in November of 2012. For five of those seven years I played the game for upwards of 30 hours a week, making the game my primary entertainment and social outlet. In this study, I blend narratives of my online experiences with a critically informed analysis of those experiences. I used a single site autoethnographic research design to both gather data from game participants and draw on personal experience in order to describe how *World of Warcraft* functions as a game, as a meaning maker, and as a social space. Since 2009, I have taken extensive notes on my experiences as a player and as an active member (and sometimes officer) of one specific guild which I have given the pseudonym "Found This Humerous" (FTH). I have been a member of three separate guilds, but my experiences within FTH are the most extensive and of the longest duration (over 5 years of total gaming time). I combine these journal entries with the insights of other scholars who study *World of Warcraft* in order to form a nuanced view of game operations and player motivations. In writing and coding my field notes, I look for moments in the game where I or other players have been made uncomfortably aware of my/their physical world racial and gender identities, or felt a tension between the immersion in the world and real life experience. These ethnographic vignettes serve as practical examples of how the game shapes the player into the ideal game citizen and of how racial identity is formed, performed, and alternately ignored or attacked by the game's players. My field notes consist of both my own authethnographic

entries, screenshots of text chats or meta-diagetic narrative segments, and notes from interviews with other players. I rely on autoethnography rather than traditional ethnography because experiences within *World of Warcraft* are by no means universal. My own identity politics played a large role in shaping how I experienced the game, and so I have chosen to trace the friction in my own online interactions as a way to gain deeper insight into *WoW*'s game culture as a whole.

Over a period of two years, I also conducted nearly fifty interviews with players of *World of Warcraft*. I selected the vast majority of my interview participants through an IRB-approved "cold-calling process" during which I would ask any moderately talkative and non-abusive player to chat with me briefly in an out-of-game chat via either a chat service or a VOIP call. Many players in PUGs [Pick Up Groups] are verbally abusive or unwilling to communicate with a stranger, so I learned to select from the talkative and non-abusive players very quickly. I should note that these interviews are also supplemented with more in-depth discussions with players that I knew from past guild memberships. I usually selected these players from small PUGs in multi-server dungeons in order to ensure that I had a fair sampling of players from across the game. The players I interviewed played for both the Horde and the Alliance, though initial contact for all players took place while playing Horde characters. Our conversations were informal, but structured by a predetermined set of approved topics. My questions focused on anecdotes of guild infighting, questions about opinions on the race war and character building, and their engagement with the game's narrative. I wished to test my own game experiences against those of other players in order to determine how typical/generalizable they were. I

also sought to gain a sense of how aware or not aware other players were of the kinds of racial pedagogy in the game and how they reconciled themselves and their real life identities to those methods of citizenship-training. While these interviews gave me a sense of the player experience at large, this material seldom finds its way into my chapters. The bulk of my interviews focused on the creation of community and personal experience within *WoW* rather than on racial identity and online interaction. As my project changed in shape, it shifted form a study of the performance of digital histories within ludic communities to one that places racial identification of the center of my analysis. While the bulk of my interviews did not apply to my refined project, excerpts from a few have served as supporting anecdotes that either mirror my own online experiences or provided much a much needed foil to my early assumptions about game experience. In all written analysis of these interviews, I refer to players by avatarial pseudonyms only.

In addition to my notes, journal entries, and the written experiences of others, I have assembled an archive of textual materials in the form of screen shots, machinima, fan-site entries, guild website entries, posts from *WoW*wiki,[5] and the Blizzard novels. My analysis of these artifacts focuses on several topics. I examine the game's narrative (documented both in-game and in the wiki) in order to find patterns of postcolonial and (neo)colonial mythmaking. I also analyze the representation of avatars and non-player characters within the game and analyze their codes in the context of the larger *WoW*

[5] *WoW*wiki, while compiled by fans, is the most comprehensive and encyclopedic knowledge base for *World of Warcraft*. It is also the second largest wiki in the world and includes significant background from both the game narrative and the *Warcraft* fiction series.

narrative. Finally, I look for the ways in which the game indirectly and directly articulates the composition of the ideal player/citizen.

A note on "the real": I have chosen to refer to the physical, actual, quotidian world of living, breathing, eating, and sleeping humans as the "real" world throughout, though this is not the term most scholars employ. In conversations with digital scholar and anthropologist Tom Boellstorff, I have often heard him emphasize the use of the term "physical world" over the term "real", stressing that the interactions and experiences of the virtual spaces in which so many of us choose to spend our time are just as "real" and important as those in physical spaces. Flesh and blood experiences are just as constructed as those that are online, so Boellstorff has argued that using the term "real" glosses over the importance of online experiences (DPDF 2010). I posit that while largely true, this distinction between the terms may be slightly misleading; players in a variety of virtual spaces including *WoW* refer to their physical existences as "RL", or "real life", indicating that the players themselves impose a conscious boundary between the two spaces--a fact that I believe contributes to the fantasy-making process of game-play and the permission-granting process of questionable virtual behavior that I examine throughout this dissertation. Though the friendships, arguments, and time invested in the game are certainly real, this division indicates that the players believe that their actions online are at least somewhat removed from the reality of the everyday. I have chosen to honor the distinction of physical life as "real" whenever possible.

Who's the Barbarian Now?

World of Warcraft, like its book and table-top based predecessors,[6] relies heavily on Tolkien's fantasy universe from the ever-popular *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. *WoW* presents the player with a pre-industrial, feudal world of humans, elves, orcs, and trolls (among others). The two-faction structure of the game divides these "races" (the more accurate term would be species) into distinct groupings of white-bodied and non-white bodied creatures.[7] Race is communicated through avatar skin tone, environmental markers (such as totem poles or medieval/gothic European architecture), and coded avatarial performances (such as the dark-skinned orc's MC Hammer dance or the fair-skinned gnome's Irish clogging) that mark the cartooned bodies as either white (European) or non-white. The game's racial system names these factions "Alliance" and "Horde", gesturing toward an already familiar Western trope of "us" vs. "them" (in the case of WWII's Allied and Axis powers) or the even more foreboding trope of "civilized" and "barbarian". This is by no means an uncommon division; nearly every fantasy genre role-playing game casts the more fantastic, less humanoid creatures (specifically trolls and orcs) in a negative light. *WoW,* however, takes this Tolkienesque understanding of racial difference to new heights by encoding each digital race with contemporary, physical world referents to generalized Western stereotypes of race. The "cruel" and "barbaric" trolls possess "dark mysticism", practice a form of Voodoo, and speak with Jamaican accents. Orcs are "savage", semi-nomadic former slaves who live in hide huts.

[6] I refer here to "Dungeons and Dragons" and the similar role-playing systems that rose to popularity in the 1970s.

[7] Each faction hosts one exception to this rule—additions from the first game expansion in 2006.

New media scholar Jessica Langer explains that the seemingly peaceful, bovine Tauren serve as "implacable enemies who will use every ounce of their strength to smash their enemies under hoof" while living in teepee-like homes atop cliffs dotted with totem poles (91). The list of references goes on: both the marginalized peoples of the Horde side and the white/empowered races of the Alliance are coded with essentialized understandings of historical, physical world cultures. My own experiences with these reductive representations and the fallout from questioning them in the context of social interaction with fellow guild-members inspired the research that developed into this dissertation project.

As Omi and Winant argued in *Racial Formation in the United States,* race is a matter of social structure, cultural representation, and quotidian practice (52). The structures to which Omi and Winant refer, however, are more directly related to limiting factors of economics, geography, and policy; these components are absent in *WoW,* a partial absence that I will address in Chapter 4. *World of Warcraft* provides the opportunity to observe racial formation on both of these other levels (cultural representation and quotidian practice)--in the social interaction between players and in the way that Blizzard has chosen to portray race in the game. What is particularly interesting about it is that players can embody characters from either side of the racial divide, engaging in what visual culture scholar Lisa Nakamura calls digital "tourism". She states that "[i]nternet users who adopt other racialized personae can practice a form of tourism by adopting a repertoire of racial cybertypes. They replicate versions of Otherness that confirm its exotic qualities and close off genuine dialogue with the

pronounced minority of users who are not white and male."[8] Nakamura goes on to explain that this type of tourism allows the user to play at being both tourist and native simultaneously; one can embody the Other in order to validate an understanding of that Other--an activity that seems more than a little similar to Steven Mullaney's description of "rehearsing culture" as a means of consuming it.

While I agree with much of the scholarship concerning digital identity formation (and Nakamura's work in particular), I am most intrigued by the slippage between the bodies that we inhabit in the real world and those in the digital. In particular, I am fascinated by the fact that the identification process (and inherent slippage therein) creates within the game a gap between an understanding of expected identity performance and accepted identity performance. Players expect every other player to perform as a white, heterosexual male (even if they themselves do not conform to this identity) and the player population as a whole polices deviations from this performance. It is for this reason that I find Nakamura's theory of digital racial tourism inadequate for discussing the types of racial performance I have seen online; players may revel in the ability to "visit" a racialized body of an Other, but they use those bodies and the problematic racial structures of *WoW* to reify the digital space as a space of whiteness. This blind spot is potentially insidious and is the source of the ethnographic anecdotes upon which I base much of my analysis. In the seven years that I played *World of Warcraft*, I repeatedly encountered conflict around the subjects of race and class. I often noted that my altercations with other players revolved around my inability to blend into

[8] Nakamura, Lisa. *Cybertypes*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2002. p 55.

the community of my guild. Most notably, my failure to blend in was usually due to an unwillingness to disregard racial slurs, ignore the racial codes of the narrative game-world, or hide my own race and class origins/biases. Upon reflection, I realized that while each guild I had been a member of relied on a set of consensus rules that banned overtly discriminatory expression, they ignored the racial underpinnings that were already part of gaming vernacular. In each instance, the guild created such rules to protect its players (whose race, class, and gender origins *could* be concealed within guild chat) from offense, though such gestures are often enforced only sporadically. Guild formation and governance takes place within the game, but independent of its designers and therefore has no immediate influence on game narrative or structure. The majority of social interaction in the guild chat space focuses on activities in the narrative or combative realms of the virtual world, with the result that the game's racial codes and conducts, oriented towards the production and validation of white subjectivities, supersede any of the guild's nominal efforts to avoid race, gender, or class conflict. I argue that the guild space therefore becomes a space of performed white masculinity regardless of its members' actual race, gender, or class.

Player performances of working and middle class whiteness become more complex when we consider that *World of Warcraft* is composed of discrete yet overlapping domains of interaction. Players multi-task by operating in two or more spaces on the interaction continuum simultaneously; as a result, the identities formed in one space may seep into another. The game therefore combines the aforementioned guild-policed performance of whiteness with a game narrative that asks its players to

identify with a race and develop a defensive hatred of its "opposite" within the game world. This in itself is problematic, but when we consider that each of these in-game races is coded to read as recognizable physical-world racial stereotypes, we are presented with a world that plays into what Michael Omi and Howard Winant have termed the "preconceived notions of racialized social structure[s]" (59). Though *World of Warcraft* avoids mirroring the limitations of institutional racism within the game world, the game asks players to reproduce the outdated attitudes that match its binary conflict of white bodies vs. Other bodies, human vs. inhuman, civilized vs. barbarian, and good vs. evil. As players slip between the various modes of interaction, they then begin to police performances of Otherness in the social space in much the same way that the game tells them to destroy performances of Otherness in the virtual world.

Current Scholarship

As an interdisciplinary project, my research necessarily draws upon scholarship from a variety of fields. I rely on game and new media theories for the foundation of my argument, but have also integrated anthropological and economic studies of game spaces and some performance scholarship into my work. Recent scholarship on games and on *World of Warcraft* in particular has exploded over the past decade, and I have borrowed heavily from some of the newer works in that area of study. Hilde Corneiliussen and Jill Rettberg's edited volume *Digital Culture, Play and Identity* (particularly Jessica Langer's discussion of a post-colonial *Warcraft*), Bonnie Nardi's *My Life as a Night Elf Priest*, and William Bainbridge's *The Warcraft Civilization* have proved significant works for my

research as they examine the game through a variety of lenses (including the feminist, postcolonial, and corporate lenses). I modeled parts of my ethnography on Bonnie Nardi's participant-observer research on *WoW,* though I do not cite her work directly within my own. In order to address the collision of so many terms--identity, citizenship, otherness, and the realms of interaction contained within *WoW*-- I draw on foundational theories from new media, performance, and social science scholarship. I rely in particular on media theorists James Gee, Lisa Nakamura, and Zach Waggoner to inform my understanding of the issues of identity, embodiment, and immersion in the interactive real. In particular, I cite Gee's separation of the virtual, real, and projective selves in order to explain my own theories of the interaction continuum and realms of digital experience. These selves refer to the game player, complete with real-world biases and motivations (real), the avatarial self, a digital being with in-game biases and motivations (virtual), and the combination of the two, where the game player adopts and internalizes the biases and motivations of the avatar and blends them with his or her own real-world motivations (projective).

The relationship between the player's physical body and the avatar's digital body is by no means unexplored, though few scholars have analyzed the connection through the lens of performance. I have therefore drawn upon several non-performance scholarly studies in order to form an understanding of embodiment in cyberspace. Recent work on digital identification and embodiment also informs this project. Tyrone Adams and Steven Smith's volume on *Electronic Tribes,* which attempts to answer many questions about guild kinship and identification with the goals of the game narrative, has proved to

be informative, but it is Lisa Nakamura's explorations of representations of race in cyberspace and avatar formation that guide my investigation of guild interaction and what I have termed the "digital identity continuum". In order to thoroughly explore this continuum of digital identification across the narrative, linguistic, and participatory modes of life in *World of Warcraft*, it is necessary to explore avatarial embodiment itself. A growing body of work focuses on the avatar as the digital representation of the physical body, the "third self", or a surrogate, but these studies tend to concentrate on the identity in only one realm (usually within the narrative realm in games, or the social realm in other digital spaces such as chat rooms or Second Life). Game theorist Zach Waggoner's *My Avatar, My Self* is an excellent resource on identity within video games, though again his work concentrates on game narrative and participatory modes more than the linguistic realm of the social space. However, his work provides an excellent theoretical base for understanding avatarial identity. He also draws from a wide variety of disciplines—game theory, new media, and performance—in order to present a survey of current thoughts on identity formation both on and offline. He draws from Judith Butler's discussion of gender identity as a repeated performance of a societal belief of core identity and links this to Jonathan Friedman's discussion of the mask as societal identity play. He links these theories in turn with James Gee's discussions of the avatar as surrogate-self only to eventually conclude that he agrees most with James Newman's discussion of digital identity-making as a form of digital embodiment. Sue-Ellen Case's "Dracula's Daughters" in Janelle Reinelt and Joseph Roach's *Critical Theory and Performance* offers additional approaches to understanding identity via the avatar.

Specifically, Case concentrates on the commercial nature of the digital world, explaining that the contemporary construction of self in these spaces resembles a form of promotion ("race" and gender as brand) rather than a traditional system of signs. Her analysis of the avatar as mask and avatar as fetish provides an alternate method of approaching Sherry Turkle's "third self" or James Gee's "surrogate" self in the digital realm, though her analysis does not engage the virtual space of immersive play. Each of these works informs my own analysis of avatarial embodiment and identity formation in the digital spaces. My analysis of virtual embodiment builds upon the surrogate-self argument of Turkle and Gee (among others), though I would challenge the implicit assumption of stable virtual identity within their texts. My examination focuses, in part, on the shifts a player makes between the various realms in the game and how this instability impacts a player's performance of self within the guild chat culture.

While there is a significant body of work on virtual embodiment and on *World of Warcraft* as a specific research site, there is also a larger body of work on cyberworlds in general that informs my project. Mark Nunes's *Cyberspaces of Everyday Life* grounds the concept of cyberspace as cyber-place in an attempt to mark websites (and by extension, larger interactive virtual worlds) as material, conceptual, and experiential. His work begins to delve into the seemingly free "sandbox" feel of webpages and their less obvious modes of control, which provides a starting point for my own explorations of the controlling nature of *World of Warcraft*'s structure. Edward Castronova's *Exodus to the Virtual World*, while ostensibly an economics text, provides useful insight into the potential of video game rule-sets to create change in the physical world and on the

player's willingness to invest both time and capital into spaces of virtual "fun" (an argument that Jane McGonigal has also taken up in *Reality is Broken*, a text that promotes the power of gaming to create social change). Each of these texts promotes either an optimistic or cautionary tale about the power of gaming, but this project focuses more on how games reshape how players think and perform while *in* the game world and its embedded social space. This project expands upon the more cautionary tales of this set of literature, focusing not on the power of game but the power of performative narrative in shaping player behaviors across multiple modes of interaction.

With regard to governmentality, a large portion of my analysis will focus on the ways in which the game shapes self-governing groups and subjects within each server. While some cyberworlds scholars (Castronova, Bainbridge, Adams/Smith) analyze how the game organizes and mobilizes player labor within the game, they do not focus on the ties between game structure and small-group government (or failure to govern). In order to analyze the ways in which *World of Warcraft* helps create virtual citizens that will both sustain the game and continue returning to it, I will rely on David Macleod's *Building Character in the American Boy* as a thorough analysis of modern-era character building and as a frame through which to view the pedagogical structures of the game. I will also necessarily rely on Michel Foucault's extensive theorization of governmentality as the mobilization of tactics that promote the development of the ideal (here, virtual) citizen. In particular, I wish to pay heed to *World of Warcraft*'s ability to "market ideals of efficiency, productivity, and competitiveness" in order to create a self-governing and supportive populace (Werry xxv). Foucault's myriad writings on the subject of

governmentality will inform this discussion, though I will focus my attention primarily on *The Birth of Biopolitics*, *The Courage of Truth*, and *The Government of Self and Others*.

As a study of race and particularly of whiteness, my project will necessarily rely on that body of literature. My analysis is deeply indebted to a long tradition of work in cultural studies (from Raymond Williams, to Stuart Hall, to Henry Giroux) each of which have held the seemingly innocent realms of popular cultural "entertainment" to task for reproducing white hegemony by training consumers to take up forms of racial subjectivity with which they might not otherwise identify. However, it is Michael Omi and Howard Winant's *Racial Formation in the United States* that provides the foundation of my theorization of race in *WoW* with their nuanced definition and historicization of the concept of race. Where Omi and Winant focus largely on the production of disadvantaged categories of Otherness, the literature on whiteness details how these structures are secured by the invisible privilege of whiteness. In his article "White", Richard Dyer explains that "whiteness secures white power by making it hard, especially for white people and their media, to 'see' whiteness," thus making it difficult to analyze or even name (44). Whiteness is the standard from which all other races 'deviate', and legitimizes the continued performance of racist actions on the part of individuals and institutions. Throughout this study, I address the whiteness of the virtual space, its supposed freedom from the strictures of real-world racism, and the ways in which the whiteness of *WoW* serves to obfuscate the consequences of racism while encouraging players to perform racist acts online.

My discussion of *World of Warcraft* necessarily relies on an analysis of institutionalized structures of racism within American political and social culture. I define institutional racism as the effects of the naturalized, historic attitudes toward non-White races within the US—specifically the limitation of rights, equal access to services or employment, and the myriad less visible and identifiable racist acts performed by individuals, corporations, and governments throughout the US and the world. I have drawn this definition from James Jones' *Prejudice and Racism*, where he defines institutional racism as "those established laws, customs, and practices which systematically reflect and produce racial inequalities in American society. If racist consequences accrue to institutional laws, customs, or practices, the institution is racist whether or not the individuals maintaining those practices have racist intentions. Institutional racism can be either overt or covert" (438). I mark this here as a contrast to individual racism, in which individuals alter their interactions with Othered individuals out of the belief that one race is superior or inferior to the other. I argue that a digital space that is coded as a space of white masculinity generates a prohibitive virtual climate; the absence of obvious structural impediments to in-game advancement displaces the mechanisms of racism to the social realm, where players are asked to acquiesce to a "acceptable" performances of race and gender as dictated by online social groups and reinforced by a pervading structure of feeling that is distinctly 19th century. This study addresses both forms of racism throughout, evidence of which comes from ethnographic interviews, personal experience, and the reports of digital race scholars such as Lisa Nakamura.

Lisa Nakamura, as a scholar of both racial politics and digital worlds/internet socialization is also one of the primary sources that I have consulted for critical analyses of the representation and/or disappearance of race in digital spaces. In *Cybertypes*, Nakamura discusses the internet's potential to shape and reshape our understanding of race, ethnicity, and identity: I expand upon her arguments by discussing immersive culture's potential to shape our *performance* of racial identity and briefly discuss the limitations of digital racial embodiment as tourism alone. Finally, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's theorization of *white habitus* within his book *Racism without Racists* has allowed me to analyze the formation and maintenance of 19th century structures of feeling within *WoW*.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter two focuses on the roles of narrativity, myth, and game lore in the player's racial formation process within the game. This chapter pinpoints some of *WoW*'s varying influences so that we might understand the world in which the player immerses his or her self. I expound on the influences of white mythologies such as Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* series and Gary Gygax's *Dungeons & Dragons* role-playing system and how they influence the creation of a binary schism between the dark and light bodied characters of the game. I analyze how these varying influences create a space of *white habitus* (Bonilla-Silva 104) that reinforces ideologies of white superiority within the gaming space and how this feeling of superiority, which draws on distinctly 19th century

modes of racial understanding, creates a "structure of feeling" that reifies whiteness while denigrating evil, dark bodies.

My analysis concentrates on the character creation process and its role in helping the layer develop an understanding of historic race relations within the fantasy world. I also examine the ways in which these characters are racially codified and how the representation of essentialized bodies in a ludic space serves to obfuscate race and racism rather than expose them. Finally, I discuss the coded bodies of the game's avatars and their lack of connection to the raced bodies of the players in the game. I posit that the game assumes a target audience of young, white men, which results in a space that is poorly equipped to handle players of color, female players, or homosexual players if they choose to perform their real world identities faithfully. *WoW* demands that its players pass as white in order to gain acceptance within the game, but players often find themselves the victims of casual racism and sexism no matter how well they adhere to the performative scripts of the game's social space..

Chapter three utilizes my description of the interaction continuum to analyze how game ideologies traverse the various modes of online interaction via the vehicle of the player. I posit that the guild, as a space of sociality in which players perform a version of selfhood that more closely resembles their real-world identities than the adopted mores and motivations of their in-game avatars, serves as a the living room in the structure that is *WoW,* a space where the real and virtual selves meet and socialize and which generates the cultural capital of the game. As such, players necessarily draw upon both their real-world ideologies and their adopted/naturalized in-game ideologies when interacting with

other players in this space--an act that often causes these various identities to abrade against the game's racial logic.

I focus my analysis in this chapter on the conditions of immersion, embodiment, and habitus in game and what role they play in the creation of player identities. A significant portion of this chapter is spent parsing the varying definitions of these terms in order to gain a nuanced understanding of how they work together to create a holistic player experience. Recent studies on the avatar/player relationship have revealed that avatar gender, at the very least, affects traditionally gendered activities within the virtual world.[9] I cannot help questioning whether race has a similar influence on player behavior both in and out of the game. This is partially because the racial divide in *WoW* does more than justify the game's perpetual war; it also helps to promote and maintain conflict between the two factions and thus the players who choose to remain a part of those factions. Adherence to such scripts is as much a part of the in-game identity-formation process as social interaction or engaging the narrative. I question how we can trace seepage between the various domains of digital action/interaction as markers of modernist structures of racial understanding.

Chapter four will turn my focus to a discussion of game practices and game design. I argue that *World of Warcraft* promotes typically Western ideals of capitalist productivity and self-governance in order to feed into the player's already formed/forming understanding of how a neo-liberal society functions. I complicate this argument by analyzing the influence of Medieval guild structure, progressive liberalism,

[9] Lehdonvirta, Mika, et al. "The Stoic Male: How Avatar Gender Affects Help-Seeking Behavior Online." 7.1: January 2012. pp. 29-47.

and neoliberlism on the game's design. The game relies on these structures to teach the player how to perform as an ideal citizen within the game. In order to progress from level to level, players must also learn efficiency and leadership in order to progress in the game. I use the frame of the early 20th century Boy Scouts of America to discuss the game's role in developing players who will help one another while ultimately contributing to the value of the game system as a whole.

WoW presents itself as a meritocracy in which any player can earn gold and high-level gear by simply applying him or herself to the game. However, the game ignores the very real-world issues of access to leisure time, sufficient funds, and the appropriate tools that affects so many of its players, particular those of minority status in the real world. The fantasy of an absolute meritocracy vanishes when one realizes that the social guild space also serves as a third sector program that helps players who cannot devote adequate time into research and play. These systems, however, force players to perform their subordinancy within the social space of the guild and limits their ability to gather social capital within that space. I posit that *WoW* trains players, through both the governmental structures of the game's code and through the social structures of the guild, to accede to and perform the behaviors of neoliberal capitalism in order to receive the validation of achievement.

The conclusion of this project expands upon my discussion too speculate on *WoW* as a space of global identity formation. My project problematically yet necessarily focuses on English-speaking, US-based servers of the franchise, but a large portion of the game’s players are located on servers in Europe and China. How might this highly-

constructed space of white masculinity shape their online behaviors? Do the neoliberal principles of capitalist production translate in countries with dramatically different economic priorities? I finally conclude by expanding my discussion to the pedagogical nature of immersive gaming spaces to touch on identity performance in video game culture as a whole. How do we discuss the role of minorities and women in gaming culture at large, particularly in the wake of the online terrorism experienced by such feminist game pundits as Anita Sarkeesian, Briana Wu, and Zoe Quinn? Are *all* video games unwelcoming spaces of white, male militancy, and if so how can we all work to change that system?

Chapter 2: Just a Game, What's the Big Deal?:

Obfuscating the Effects of the Digital Post-Racial Space

> *I have heard, "It is only a game!", many times over many years. Before I became aware that I had developed a significant ethos--my ethos--I may have agreed reflexively with that statement.*
>
> -Relayðr, in a Battle.net forum post
>
> September 13, 2013

From the earliest days of its launch, *World of Warcraft* presented its player community with a space that was simultaneously racially divided and post-racial. The designers created a game around a simple binary; a race war between recognizably white figures and recognizably Othered figures, rooted in historical conflicts within the lore of the larger *Warcraft* franchise.[10] The game designers chose to mark racial difference by encoding each in-game race with representational stereotypes from African American, Native American, Caribbean, Russian, Irish, English/German, and Asian cultures, cherry picking the dances, slang phrases, and phenotypic markers to create raced-yet-not-raced fantasy bodies. However, when creating the systems that would govern both in-world operations and character behaviors, the designers chose not to replicate the structural and institutional racism that inhibits upward mobility and equal opportunity in the real world.

[10] We should note that the 2012 expansion *Mists of Pandaria* introduces playable characters (the Pandaren, large Asiatic panda bears who reside on a distant and unexplored island) who comment on the futility of the war between the Horde and Alliance. Their comments may be a developer acknowledgement of the problematic construction of an eternal war, but they do not fundamentally shift the foundations of the game. A player continues to navigate the world through violence; there is no peaceable way to interact with the game.

Neither the white nor the Other characters in the game experience economic or educational setbacks; the potential for each character to advance is equal, creating what appears at first glance to be a utopian digital space despite its unfortunate race war. We might therefore consider *WoW* a mythologically post-racial space, though the game never bills itself as such; the game presents itself as a space in which race exists, but has no prejudicial effect on a character's ability to advance through its various stages of achievement. Why, then, does race play such a large role in the creation and performance of personal and avatarial identity in game?

While I initially hoped that the absence of the racist structures that govern our real-world social interactions, coupled with the opportunity to inhabit the (imagined) body of an Other, could help players think otherwise about race, I eventually concluded that the erasure of the quotidian institutional racism that we experience in the real world creates a carapace that mimics the mechanics of institutional racism. Removing the race-based limitations to advancement and placement from the digital environment, while likely intended to create a near-perfect environment of absolute equality, creates a space in which players are able to mimetically rehearse the practices of racism--using racial slurs, training players in behaviors of whiteness, and racial profiling, among others--without cost and, in turn, create a new set of micro-practices that both exclude and police player identities that don't conform to a unspoken identity norm and ignore the very real effect of real-world race on player and narrative interaction. Players exercise their real-world biases toward/against race, gender, and class within the confines of this structure without any material consequence. As Beth Kolko, Lisa Nakamura, and Gil Rodman

assert in their text *Race in Cyberspace,* the "mediated nature of cyberspace renders invisible many [...] of the visual and aural cues that serve to mark people's identity IRL [(in real life)], [but] that invisibility doesn't carry back over to 'the real world' in ways that allow people to log in and simply shrug off a lifetime of experiencing the world from specific identity-related perspectives" (4). Race, they argue, matters online because we are all already shaped by our experiences of race and racism offline. I would add that they matter because the freedom to behaviorally experiment free of the constraints of the more nuanced understanding of racial otherness of our real world grants players the ability to publically revel in a form of racial superiority that is generally considered unacceptable in our otherwise ostensibly enlightened times. The power to for a white, male player to do and say what he likes free of social or economic consequence is addictive; this is an action that the real-world generally frowns upon in our politically correct culture. We should note, however, that the freedom to experiment applies primarily to the white male player; other forms of identity performance are strictly policed online.

However, there is something about the avatarial, role-playing space of *World of Warcraft* that allows players to distance themselves from their encounters with the tropes of race and the problematic construction of an online race war in order to engage in the ludic world without the experience of "white guilt," a psychosocial and generally pejorative term that describes the experience of understanding one's privilege in relation to those negatively impacted by structures of institutional racism. My use of institutional racism here refers to the race-based system of inequality in systemic policies, practices

and economic and political structures that places minority populations at a disadvantage in relation to the white majority. This cartoony, synthetic game world acts as a buffer between a player's online actions and the potential for a player to engage in true critical empathy--a state that "makes the process of identification arduous though necessary (not easy or seamless) both by revealing empathy's potential failure and by vitalizing objects that are not normally experienced as interlocutors" (Roxworthy 99). The design of this particular digital space and its position within the frame of playful activity serve to perpetuate what are, when viewed objectively, troubling and archaic forms of racial essentialization. How, then, do players experience race and racial formation in game a game that uses stock characteristics in the programmed behaviors of its avatars? What are the stakes of being an active member of the *WoW* community; what are the performative demands of being a digital warrior?

This chapter concentrates on the role of narrativity, myth, and game lore in the creation of the distinctly 19th century attitudes toward racial politics in *World of Warcraft*. More specifically, I examine how *WoW*'s source material--much of which pays homage to the fantasy worlds of J. R. R. Tolkien's Middle Earth and Gary Gygax's *Dungeons & Dragons* gaming franchise--and the ostensibly utopian digital environment combine to create a space of whiteness that demands player performances of whiteness no matter their real-world racial identity. I focus particular attention on Tolkien's mythology and its place in creating a new narrative of Western dominance in the face of a disappearing whiteness and American myths of colonizing the savage, in order to demonstrate how affective elements of *WoW*'s dramaturgical narrative resurrect and give

life to distinctly outdated modes of racial understanding. This analysis weaves together Michael Omi and Howard Winant's theory of racial formation with Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's intervention into colorblind racism in entertainment, Karl Spracklen's discussion of whiteness in leisure practices, and Raymond Williams' theorization of 'structures of feeling' as a methodology for recognizing the problematic structures of raced and racist representation within the game. This chapter analyzes how the convergence of racially coded avatarial bodies, the perceived absence of the consequences of racial difference, the performance of real-world race/gender/class, and the white, heterosexual, masculine structure of the world create a space that forces the non-white (non-male, non-heterosexual) player to acquiesce to the predominant whiteness of the space.

I analyze Blizzard's (*WoW*'s developer) construction of a racialized virtual world and the conditions it imposes on participation through the investment in inter-racial conflict. Specifically, I focus on the point-by-point recreation of the same conditions for racial formation that exist in the real world through the systematic encoding of recognizable racial signifiers onto the bodies of the various playable avatars in the game. Throughout this chapter, I rely on Michal Omi and Howard Winant's definitions of race, racial discrimination, and racial formation to map the parallels of *WoW*'s racial design. This approach allows me to mark where the game diverges from scholarly understandings of race as socially defined and culturally enforced, for it is these moments of divergence that expose not only the game designers' dedication to creating a space of whiteness, but also the ways in which the structural racism that pervades our real-world encounters also colors every aspect of the game-world.

I pay particular attention to the formation and performance of what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva terms "white habitus," a naturalization of racial views formed within white communities. This term and Raymond Williams' theorization of "structures of feeling", serve as analytical paradigms through which I examine players' ludic experiences and articulate the friction between "dominant," contemporary understandings of racial politics as somewhat nuanced or "politically correct" and the game's "residual" modernist construction of race that utilizes over-determined historical stereotypes of minority bodies. By politically correct, I refer to enforced language used as a superficial repair for deep-seated discriminatory views of minority groups. The virtual space of this particular game presents itself as historically colonial, pre-modern, anachronistically mechanized fantasy. When experiencing this representation, the player may note deviations from a contemporary understanding of race relations; avatars in particular evoke use stock characteristics such as the noble savage, the barbaric mystic, and the greedy usurer and tie these concepts to representations of their historical Other. Such representations seem natural within the space, but strike the player as out-of-step with their understanding of the criticism of such representations in the physical world. This discomfort with the dominant structure of our physical world society evokes an almost nostalgic link to the residual structure of 19th century modern racial politics framed within what appears to be a post-racial virtual world.

This chapter begins with an introduction to the fantasy world of Azeroth and a basic explanation of the game world's history. I then discuss the influence of Tolkien and myth on the game and how racial essentialization shapes the development of its

characters. This is followed by an analysis of the game's players using Bonilla-Silva's theory of white habitus and application of Williams' theory of structures of feeling. From there I focus on racial formation, discrimination, and the disappearance of race online. Finally, I move into an ethnographic account of the pedagogical shaping of online identity performance through social policing.

Welcome to Azeroth: Mythic Structure and Design

In order to understand the racial politics of *World of Warcraft*, one must first have some familiarity with the game and its lore. *WoW* is a history that begins *in medias res*; there is extensive back-history from the franchise's earlier, non-MMO games (*Warcraft I, II, and III*). *WoW* begins in Chapter IV of the franchise's saga, just after the birth of the Horde and the Alliance as factions of cooperative racial groups and the start of the war that governs the world of Azeroth. The Horde and Alliance have each claimed a continent--the majority of the Horde races reside on Kalimdor, a continent that they stole from the Humans and colonized prior to the opening of the game. The majority of the Alliance occupies their ancestral homelands on a separate continent named the Eastern Kingdoms. However, travel between these worlds is not difficult; skirmishes appear in both halves of the world and the player--as a newly minted member of either the Horde or the Alliance--is expected either to take part or to help prepare their faction for more skirmishes to come.

The Horde's occupation of Kalimdor is important to note as the Orcs of the Horde (the primary racial group within the faction) are not originally of Azeroth. The Orcs

invaded Azeroth from their home world of Draenor through a dimensional gateway known as the Dark Portal. The portal's darkness derives from its nature as corrupted; the demonically possessed Medivh, a human guardian, raised the portal alongside the Orcish warlock Gul'dan in order to start the first war of Azeroth ("Medivh"). During their war with the native races of Azeroth, the tide turned against the Orcs and Humans eventually enslaved the race. Many years later, the Orcs were finally able to free themselves from their captors under the leadership of the great Orc Warchief Thrall. The Dark Portal had long ago closed, leaving the Orcs with no way back to Draenor, so the Orcish clans eventually retreated to the wastelands and swamps of Kalimdor. [11]

WoW's developers have therefore structured the world as a formerly colonial space from the beginning of the game; by dividing the players into opposing factions, the game allows for not only the creation of a permanent (and binary) conflict, but for the marginalization of one culture and the reification of the "good" attributes of the other. However, the game does not directly impose the validity of one faction over the other; players must make this distinction for themselves. Despite a lack of predetermined "good" and "bad" sides, *WoW*'s developers still codify the visibly raced bodies that compose each faction, allowing players to associate their own real-world preconceptions of race on their recognizable in-game counterparts. Media scholar Jessica Langer explains that:

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[11] *WoW* developers reopened the Dark Portal in the game's second expansion to *The Burning Crusade*. However, the intervening years between the First War of Azeroth and present day have created enough temporal distance that repatriating the Orcs to their original homeland is not an active discussion within the game; the Orcish home world would not welcome this long-removed tribe of Orcs, and as such the expansion focuses on several extended conflicts between the now semi-cultivated Orcs of Azeroth and the violence and uncontrolled rage of the Orcs of Outland.

> Despite the Alliance and the Horde being functionally equitable in terms of game mechanics, *World of Warcraft* carries out a constant project of radically "Othering" the Horde, not by virtue of distinctions between good and evil but rather by distinctions between civilized and savage, self and other, and center and periphery. The assumptions of good and evil that derive from these characterizations are not direct, but rather symptoms of a common Western cultural association of foreignness and insidiousness, an association that itself derives from Western colonial ideologies. (87)

WoW provides players with both white and Othered bodies to embody and control--an act that might at first appear equitable and even post-racial. However, the game's designers have created codified bodies that represent white stereotypes of Othered races and ethnicities. *WoW*'s developers created these codified bodies, which come complete with humorous dances and catch phrases, to attract players who operate within an already white ethos and demand that players of all colors and creeds perform within that paradigm. *WoW*'s seeming post-racial digital environment creates many opportunities for both racialized and racist performance.

The power of these performances, however, is somewhat reduced by the environment of the game-world. As a mythical space that reimagines aspects of the Western Medieval, Renaissance, Victorian, and contemporary eras, the game provides players with an affective distance from the racially encoding both its environment and characters; in other words, the developers do not force players to confront the realities of racial essentialization as the gameworld is presented as a fantasy world. Many players do

not interpret their actions within the game as having any relationship to their real-world lives; they interpret *WoW* as a vacuum in which the virtual world is wholly contained and therefore "just a game". In posit that the fantasy aspect of the environment provides the player with distance from responsibility for their performance of self within the game. Unlike the static, fantasy books from which *WoW* draws its visual aesthetic (*Lord of the Rings*), *WoW* is a game with a shifting storyteller where perspective is dynamic rather than absolute. The game also requires constant feedback and action from the player in order to communicate its narrative; I would argue that it is thus an active immersion into the fantasy space rather than a passive one. The demand for active player engagement is what makes the digital role-playing space so wonderfully addictive, but also creates a space with great potential for seepage between the realms of play and reality.

Tolkien, Arthur, Myth, and Race

It has historically been difficult to pinpoint whiteness as an essentialized theme within a space of leisure. Whiteness is the norm within the *WoW* environment, whereas blackness and Otherness are marked only by their deviation from white hegemony. Much of this chapter has focused on the Horde (Orcs, Tauren, Trolls, Goblins) as minority characters within the gameworld simply because they are marked as non-White. While it is important not to discount the problematic stereotypes that inform the white character tropes of the game space, I have focused more closely on characters coded as Other *because* of their deviation from the whiteness of *WoW*. These characters do things that white avatars do not; they twerk, the live in huts, they commune with nature, the practice

Voodoo, and they speak with strange accents. Each of these actions serves as a space of both exploration and reification of societal assumptions of race for the (presumed) white player.

As a fantasy space, *WoW* draws heavily and primarily from Medieval Arthurian myth, Tolkien's Middle Earth, and early role-playing games to populate and shape its environs. *WoW* is by no means the only game to do this--I refer in particular to its analog precursor, *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D), but also to early multiplayer online games such as *EverQuest*--but it is important to both mark and explain the effects of the game's homage to a Tolkienian legacy and preservation of his racial essentialization. We should note here that Gary Gygax, the creator of *D&D*, created the game as an antithesis to what he thought were the overly racist tropes of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* series and accompanying materials such as *The Silmarillion*.[12] Gygax's attempts, however, don't negate the fact that both *D&D* and Tolkien's works attempt to create an Anglo-European myth of whiteness-as-good that pervades the fantasy genre as a whole. In order to understand *World of Warcraft*'s racial divide and cultural context, one must understand Tolkien's myth of Western whiteness and its place in the development of the fantasy narrative.

I am certainly not the first to make the connection between Tolkien and *World of Warcraft*'s extensive menagerie of fantastical creatures. Jessica Langer, Karl Spracklen, Nick Yee, and many other new media scholars have drawn the line from one to the other. Langer and Spracklen, in particular, discuss the historical colonial nature of Tolkien's

[12] I am here defining racism via Omi and Winant in *Racial Formation in the United States* as a project that "creates or reproduces structures of domination based on essentialist categories of race." (71)

mythology in relation to the development of the game's narrative. Here I have relied on their work to illuminate the binaries that form the foundation of the game's racial conflict.

When Blizzard game developers accepted and transplanted Tolkien's division of the races directly into the *Warcraft* universe, they were creating a space that mirrors the xenophobic and racially problematic ideals of the dying empire of 1950s Britain Though writing in the mid 20th century, Tolkien's work represents a nostalgia for a "simpler" time. One might interpret this as a lament for the death of the largely agrarian culture of 19th century Britain and a landscape unmarred by the stench and smoke of industrialization, two World Wars, and shifts in population demographics. In his book *Whiteness and Leisure*, Karl Spracklen discusses the folk myth of blood and race/nation as observed in the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Tolkien, he states, "was deliberately evoking these notions at a time when England was in the middle of a debate about Englishness." Here he refers to the post-war England of the 1950s where Englishness was defined in relation to its waning empire and the sudden influx of Othered bodies (Easthope 61). As literature scholar Sue Kim explains in her article "Race and Postmodernism in *The Lord of the Rings* Films", good and evil are associated with the archetypal light and dark, but also with English/Scandanavian culture and (Near and Middle) Eastern or Southern cultures, respectively. Within the *LotR* films, Hobbiton was designed to convey '"homely and familiar' comfort, that is, [the] 'Englishness'" of British pastoral life while human culture drew from Old English texts for inspiration. These distinctly white-European choices oppose the dark and foreign powers of evil, many of which mimic African and Middle Eastern cultural norms (876-78).

Tolkien "stresses the ways in which blood and 'race' combine to create better people"; in *Lord of the Rings*, these are the Numenoreans or "High Men" as represented by Aragorn of Gondor who is literally born to rule over men and lesser beings alike. The Numenoreans, white men of Arnor and Gondor, live "white medieval European lives. They are friends with the white men of Rhan but are threatened and attacked by the evil Easterlings (described as 'swarthy') and the dark-skinned Southrons" (Spracklen 70). Myth and religion scholar Patrick Curry has noted that "Tolkien's evil creatures are frequently 'swart, slant-eyed' and tend to come from the south ('the cruel Haradrim [of the southern Sunlands]) and the east ('the wild Easterlings') both threatening directions in his moral cartography" (30-31). Such a schism between light and dark is hardly new in fantasy literature; it serves to create shorthand for the reader so that evil might be readily identified. *The Lord of the Rings* drew on social and scientific understandings of racism from the 19th and early 20th centuries to reinscribe a mythological racial hierarchy between humanity and the various species of Middle Earth with humans as the obvious (white) moral superiors.

> The mythology of the game is based on the classical fantasy genre created by Tolkien. Different races exist with specific cultures and biological characteristics. The publicity material stresses the whiteness of the humans and non-human 'races' in the game. There is a default northern European/medieval Europe home world landscape, and where the adventures move beyond this landscape the exotic Others of Orientalism and imperialism quickly appear. Characters take part in acts

> of violence and robbery, working together to impose their will on others, ultimately fighting rivals and the forces of evil to become rulers. (Spracklen 71)

Spracklen indicates that *WoW*, with its discourse of domination and violence, reinforces the same mechanics that drive colonial discourse and in fact reify the hegemony of whiteness that pervades leisure in the twenty-first century. "Modern, Western society" he states, "is constituted on a myth of individualism and meritocracy, but it is in fact dependent on continuing dynamics of racialization and the construction of whiteness and the construction of the Other". We should note that *WoW*, released three years after the first of Peter Jackson 2001 *Lord of the Rings* film , draws heavily from the film's renderings of these traditionally evil fantasy creatures. For example, Tolkien described Orcs as smallish humanoids, demonic and horrible in appearance, and dark skinned, yet the *World of Warcraft* orcs bear a great resemblance to those of the *Lord of the Rings* films--ape or pig-like in appearance and grey or green skinned (only the Uruk-hai are black skinned). An image search of any popular search engine overwhelmingly returns images of Tolkien's and *Warcraft*'s creatures--few renderings with alternate imaginings surface, emphasizing how thoroughly *WoW* has drawn on *Lord of the Rings* for racial inspiration.[13]

Promotional art from the original ("vanilla") release of the game illustrates this light v. dark mentality and reinforces the inevitability of racial divide within the world by displaying refined, lighter skinned Elves in opposition to battle-scarred, dark-green skinned Orcs. This trope recalls the Arthurian saga of the Anglos vs. the Saxons and the

[13] We should note that such references are not universal. The Trolls of *Warcraft* bear almost no resemblance to those of Tolkien or Peter Jackson, but for their grotesque appearances and tribal culture.

Tolkienian saga of man vs. the forces of a dark sorcerer. I doubt that it is a coincidence that the term "vanilla is equally racially loaded, despite the fact that it is a player term that refers to the original "classic" release of *World of Warcraft* as the unenhanced, "plain" version of the game. The term is somewhat ironic as "vanilla" *WoW* is the most racially divided of the various releases. Subsequent releases included Othered characters in the Alliance and recognizably white characters in the Horde. (While there is no evidence to support my hypothesis, I believe the racial diversification across the two factions may be a response to criticism and complaint in the initial run of "vanilla" *WoW*.)

Spracklen continues to argue that *World of Warcraft*, like all Western leisure spaces, is a space that assumes whiteness as its primary mode of operation. Leisure is an activity of privilege and therefore of class and race; the creation of spaces devoted entirely to leisure is therefore inextricably linked to the idea of whiteness, as leisure time itself is an invention of the white 19th century middle class.[14] *WoW*'s whiteness can be witnessed first and foremost through its avatar generator. There is no race in *WoW* that allows for the creation of an explicitly non-white character. The Alliance races are universally pale skinned, lavender, or light blue toned. The darkest color available to a human is a light ash, and all available nose types are decidedly Romanesque. Despite the variety of "races" and skin tones in the game, a player cannot create a character that looks recognizably Black, Asian, or Native American. This exclusion was likely not intentional, but the fact that it was overlooked is evidence, according to sociologist David

[14] Here Spracklen refers to leisure as linked with the wage-labor system as opposed to leisure through festivity.

Dietrich, of unquestioned standards of whiteness (97). By "forcing an Anglo appearance on avatars that purport to represent the player", *World of Warcraft* contributes to the creation of a digital "white habitus" and implies that the non-white player is not welcome in the digital space (104). However, Dietrich's analysis refers only to human characters within video games, a problem when we consider that humans are one of only 13 playable races within *WoW*. I would argue that players are forced to *either* inhabit an Anglo-appearing and obviously human character or to perform a kind of stereotyped Otherness that is itself a projection of white assumptions about non-white races—in essence, a sort of digital blackface, redface, or yellowface. This type of cross-racial identification actually supports white habitus rather than undermining it.

The term "white habitus" to which Dietrich refers is what Bonilla-Silva described as a "racialized, uninterrupted socialization process that conditions and creates whites' racial tastes, perceptions, feelings and emotions and their views on racial matters" (104). Bonilla-Silva explains that most whites grow up within this hyper-segregated social environment, leading them to "develop positive attitudes about themselves and negative views about racial others" (Bonilla-Silva, Goar, and Embrick 229), an attitude that extends into the virtual space and effects player attitudes toward avatars coded as "non-white", even if they may in fact be inhabiting an Other identity (Eastwick and Gardner). Much of the existing gaming scholarship argues that the prevalence of this "white habitus" has the potential to reinforce ideologies of white superiority outside of the game space. While I do not dispute this fact, I have chosen to focus on the effects of Bonilla-

Silva's habitus on the avatar creation process and its ability to expose the inherent white bias coded into the foundations of the game (and its players).[15]

I would argue that in-game coding allows for discriminatory habitus to thrive in online gaming experiences. The real-world values of whiteness--a part of the white player's vocabulary and thought process since birth, but not so formalized as to be a true ideology--combines with the anonymous nature of the game space and creates the potential for not just an assumption of white superiority, but for the outright abuse of those who do not fit into the white, heterosexual, male target audience of the game; such usage is so pervasive that I even found myself using such terms as a part of my gaming vernacular on occasion. In my online experiences, I noted that players make use of language that they could never use in real-world interactions; offensive, racist, misogynist, and generally discriminatory behavior is a part of everyday digital life in *WoW,* and players employ it most frequently as a method of diminishing their in-game enemies without regard to who may be listening in.

The adoption and naturalization of attitudes long considered passé in real interaction harkens back to a residual "structure of feeling", the term Raymond Williams defines as the feeling of "social experience in solution." The phrase "in solution" recalls high school chemistry more than it does textual analysis: a solution, is defined as "a more or less fluid substance [or] a dissolved state or condition". I have chosen to mobilize the term as a way of describing racial politics in *WoW*. Here outdated and outmoded racial politics are the solute in a solution of digital experiences. These racial politics are so

[15] For further information on my own cultural and ideological position as concerns this study, please refer to Chapter 1.

dissolved that we cannot see or name them directly, much as one cannot see the salt in a solution of saline. We can, however, taste salt just as we can feel the presence (and, often, the consequences) of discriminatory racial practices in digital experience. The solute itself remains intangible as it is still a "social experience that is still *in process*" (132). Williams states that we cannot recognize the moment while we live it and that analyzing its presence is to relegate it to the past--or, in the terms of our metaphor, to distill the solution so that the solute becomes visible. To do so is to render the mixture a solution no more. As literature scholar Mitchum Huehls explains, "if you can identify a nexus of social relations and experiences as a structure of feeling, you are either observing a historical configuration that has lost its indeterminate dynamism, or your observation will be imprecise and provisional because structures of feeling actually precede articulation" (419). Cultural production distills the solution that is social experience, rendering the moment somewhat knowable.

We must think of a structure of feeling as not so much as a feeling but as an acknowledgment that our understanding of the present is always compromised by our positionality as a part of the present. William's theory expounds on this state, explaining that the present is in fact comprised of three simultaneous, yet distinct layers of experience: the dominant, residual, and emergent. The dominant represents the spirit or mode of any given epoch/age while the residual represents that of an age gone before. The emergent represents a developing mode of experience. For the purposes of application to *WoW,* however, I have concentrated on the tension between the dominant and residual modes. What is important to note is that the dominant mode of experience

still has the institutional memory of its own past, therefore the residual mode of experience always operates within the framework of the dominant. When we apply this theory to *WoW* as a methodology, what we suppose is that, as a digital space that mirrors the reality of our everyday lives (albeit in a fantastical way), we expect the dominant mode of experience to mirror the social experiences of the real world. Players expect the same level of awareness toward discriminatory behavior and, as I will argue later, a sort of blind acceptance of the same post-racial attitudes that we find in the real world. However, the structure of the digital space--as one that embraces anonymity and does not impose many consequences for breaking the codes of polite society--allows players to embrace a more residual form of social behavior (namely discriminatory behavior). *WoW*'s own racial ideologies, couched in terms of a mythological war, draw on residual structures of 19th and early 20th century racial understanding. By introducing a reversed colonial narrative, avatars whose bodies define race along binary ethnic and biologic lines, and histories that mirror the atrocities of West's racial project (slavery and segregation, for instance), *WoW* creates a space in which players are not only comfortable with embracing clearly outmoded racial ideologies, but where they will defend their right to exhibit discriminatory behaviors. All the while, players continue to believe that they operate solely in a space that mirrors the dominant mode of US culture--one that many seem to believe has moved beyond open discrimination and is approaching (if not already) a post-racial era.

Virtual Post-Racial Liberalism

Both scholars and the media mobilize the term *post-racial* in a variety of ways as a method for discussing the current state of race relations in a specific geographic location (usually the West or the United States). I have chosen to focus my attentions on what Tim Wise has termed "post-racial liberalism", which he characterizes "by its rhetoric of racial transcendence and its public policy agenda of colorblind universalism", a position that is supported by the belief that inequality is no longer the direct result of racism and that as a society we must act as though this belief is truth, despite evidence to the contrary (64). Wise's definition gestures toward a societal desire to move beyond the acknowledged racial inequality of Jim Crow era policy and toward an idealized society of equality in which race simply does not affect economic potential, upward mobility, or interpersonal and intergroup interaction. Wise draws our attention to the fact that the nation's rhetoric of racial transcendence is internally inconsistent as we "presumes white folks are now committed to racial equality" while the repetition of blatantly racialized actions would indicate that we are far from achieving that goal (64). While this definition of post-racial liberalism obfuscates the institutional inequality that has shaped the United States for the last two centuries, it does not disregard race's role in the formation of personal and group identity, as in order to ignore race, one must first acknowledge that it exists through the recognition of difference.

The problem of post-racial liberalism does not stop at the quandary of recognition; removing (or burying) race as a central issue of the societal inequality forces us to look elsewhere for the source of societal unfairness and injustice. Communications scholar Catherine Squires asserts that such post-racial discourses

> [...] obfuscate institutional racism and blame continuing racial inequalities on individuals who make poor choices for themselves or their families. [...This resonates] with neoliberal discourses because of their shared investment in individual-level analysis and concern with individual freedoms. Remedies that draw upon group solidarity or require state or other kinds of intervention in the marketplace--a realm imagined to be neutral, organized by self-interested individual choices--are deemed suspect and anathema to values such as merit or hard work. (6)

Squires' reference to the marketplace is important; post-racial discourse assumes that all participants in an economic, educational, or other institutional system should be equally able to advance and profit from that system. *WoW*'s designers built their fantasy world entirely on this principle. Despite the various races and talents of the avatars players may build in the virtual realm--and it's important to note that each in-game character has a slight racial advantage in at least one area--all are able to level, to participate in the economy, to join a guild, and to fight on essentially equal grounds. While some characters require more outside research to play well or more practice with keystroke timing, each is equipped with the same potential for achievement. This equality-in-potential essentially eliminates the player's immediate need to recognize race as a limiting factor in their game-play. There is therefore no particular shame or social handicap associated with choosing to play one race or another as the choice is based solely on personal preference of the player. However, the lack of any obvious difference

between the various playable races of the game raises the question of why the game needs distinct "races" at all?

It is important to stop here and to clarify the game's use of the term "race" in reference to its art and lore. Historically, scholars have defined race along three schools of thought with little scholarly consensus on what defines a "race". These schools, which Eduardo Bonilla-Silva identifies in *Racism Without Races*, are: (a) race as socially constructed, but not a fundamental category of analysis and praxis, (b) race as a sociological phenomenon that results in widened achievement gaps and increased crime, and (c) race as a social category (such as class or gender) that is constructed but *also* a social reality with real effects on its actors (8-9). There is a fourth category that Bonilla-Silva does not directly address, however, and that is race as an identifiable biological difference: polygenism. Polygenism's "scientific" racism derives from mid-19th to early 20th century ideologies of phenotypic differences. This particular definition stands in opposition to the social constructionist view and claims that there is an absolute and socially consequential genetic basis for racial difference--a theory that has been largely discounted in academic circles in recent years (Kolko, Nakamura, Rodman 2).

While most scholars no longer regard genetic difference as a marker for racial difference, new media scholar Eric Watts cautions against discounting the affect of such theories out of hand. He states:

> Treating "race" as merely a social construction misses a crucial facet of its nature; the power of tropes in race[...that are] coded into the institutions we inhabit and the social relations regulated by them. [...] Saying that "race" is a "fiction" does

> very little to disable its vigorous affects[...] The trope of the "postracial" enunciates the "demise" of "race" (216-17).

Here Watts asserts that the biological *assumption* (scientifically verifiable or not) of racial difference remains the basis of how race works societally. We cannot discount biological signifiers such as phenotypic markers that mark deviations from "normal" (white) and their role in the creation of a deviant subset of the population in the minds of society as a whole.

It is these phenotypic markers that *World of Warcraft* uses as its definition of race within the game world. Race within *WoW* is not a social construct, but a biological fact--a structure that aligns most closely with 19th and early 20th century racial anthropology, which defined race as an objective, biological and genetic concept. I refer in particular to the works of early 19th century naturalists which claim that race is a biological division that determines the activities, relations, and culture (and thus, material success) of a given group--a claim that in the latter part of the 19th century would become a foundational component of the eugenics movement (Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended* 80-82). The term "race" in the gameworld refers more to a difference in species rather than a difference in skin color, though skin color does play a role in the separation of the races. All the playable characters within the game are recognizably humanoid: bipedal, land-dwelling, civilized (industrialized), and capable of speech. Their cultures, which designers lifted directly from recognizable real-world cultures (objects such as a tipi or grass hut and performative dances and accents) create digital creatures who are aesthetically mythological, but imbued with real-world performative powers and who

reside within a codified environment. Each race offers a limited array of skin colors and facial features from which to choose, allowing the player to customize their character in a limited capacity and creating a somewhat diverse population of "looks" within each race. While each character is humanoid, the gaps between the physicalities of each race are so vast that it is hard to imagine biological relationships between some of the species. While all vaguely humanoid, the bovine Tauren and alien, caprine Draenei bear almost no resemblance to one another but for each race having the requisite number of heads and limbs. The short, squat, large-nosed gnomes look exactly as one might expect if one is familiar with the 80s cartoon "David the Gnome" (or its picture book inspiration by Wil Huygen and Rien Poortvliet), but they remain markedly different from the tall, lithe, and traditionally beautiful human race. The availability of choice of avatar within the game certainly makes for a more engaging player experience, but feels more like a 19th century natural history museum with “native” bodies on display than a faithful representation of racial difference..

However, WoW further differentiates the various races of Azeroth by employing a tertiary definition of racial identity: that of ethnicity. Here I use Omi and Winant's definition of ethnicity as the mid-20th century racial paradigm that sought to displace the aforementioned biologic theory of race. As they explain:

> Ethnicity itself was understood as the result of a group formation process based on culture and descent. "Culture" in this formulation included such diverse factors as religion, language, "customs", nationality, and political identification.

> "Descent" involved heredity and a sense of group origins, thus suggesting that ethnicity was socially "primordial", if not biologically given, in character (15).

Omi and Winant explain that "ethnic group paradigm" quickly became a method for explaining immigrants' failure to thrive in new (white) settings--an argument that relies heavily on the belief that those of other ethnicities subscribe to inferior cultural practices and that assimilation to white values and mores is a necessary component of success in the West (16). This ideology also applied to immigrants that were not "racial" minorities (the "blacks, browns, reds, and yellows"), but European immigrants. Interestingly, *WoW* seems to apply both the ethnic and biologic paradigms to their formation of raced avatars within the game space. Each racial group within the game claims an extensive, shared cultural heritage--some more recognizably Western than others. Unlike the game's avatarial bodies, which designers drew almost directly from Greek, Germanic, and Norse mythologies as well as Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* series, the ethnicities of each racial group in the game link directly to cultural practices of real-world ethnic groups. The game simultaneously lampoons and conflates multiple cultures from geographically similar locations (so that each race represents an essentialized version of Native American, African, Caribbean, British, Western European, Eastern European, and Asian cultures) by encoding the *species* of the game with markers of real world "races". This in itself is problematic enough, but as each of the various encoded races moves away from a standard, human model, the player has no choice but to associate lack of humanness with Otherness--a criticism that most of the players I have interviewed ignore due to the lack of obviously institutionally racist practices within the game. In interviews when I asked

players about their feelings concerning the characters' appearances, standard responses reflected on armor sets or weaponry rather than the appearance of the avatar's body. When I questioned the same players more specifically about their feelings on their avatars' race, the players' responses tended to focus on a specific character's abilities or skill sets as enhanced by the choice of race. No one commented on their avatar's racial codes unless prompted. Fellow guild mate Explörator commented, "why does it matter? its not like my toon actin kinda black is gonna mean anything [sic]" (Interview June 09, 2011). Explörator's comment exposes just how low the racial stakes are for many of the players in the *WoW* forums and in the interviews I conducted; as long as their ability to play the game effectively is not challenged, most will not care whether their character is racially coded or not.

One might question why, then, would the game's designers feel the necessity to encode these fantastic bodies with real-world racial identities when fantasy bodies would have provided the biological diversity needed for a two-sided war? One fairly obvious answer is that *World of Warcraft*, despite appearing to be aimed at a largely young, white male audience, was released to an ostensibly global market--in actuality largely European, American, and East Asian markets--and therefore had to rely on essentialized narrative tropes and established media codes in order to read across multiple audiences (though it risks offending some). Another possible answer is that the game's developers thought that players would be more comfortable in a body that recognizably has a place in society. Naturally, this assumes that the cyber-society mirrors the society of our everyday realities, complete with the social constructs that attribute value (or lack

thereof) to raced bodies. Lisa Nakamura explains that the unimaginative racial encoding of digital avatars creates "racial cybertypes [that] provide familiar, solid and reassuring versions of race which other users can readily accept and understand since they are so used to seeing them in novels, films and video games" (Nakamura, *Cybertypes* 40). New Media scholar Jessica Langer asserts that such comfort brands the digital space as one of whiteness and colonization, creating a virtual world that depicts Othered races as stereotype so frequently that the "question of authenticity recedes as simplified depictions take over in a feedback loop" (101). *WoW*'s representational logic reifies these essentialized racial depictions, but also hyperbolizes them to the so that each race's identifiable tropes--particularly catch phrases and dances--become objects of frivolity and ridicule rather than accurate cultural representation. In the next section I will walk through the process of character creation in order to demonstrate how a player is asked to make choices about their performance of race from the beginning of the game and also to mark my own justifications for choices in that space.

Character Creation and Its Limitations

I started playing *World of Warcraft* in fits and starts--first as a summer experiment in 2005 and later as a way of socializing with long-distance friends. As a new player, the game's entry interface instructed me to create a character before entering the game space. My first entry into the gameworld was as a one-week trial player in May of 2005; I created a Human Rogue and played through the first twenty levels of character progression within a couple of days. This first attempt at building a playable character

drew from a source close to home--I created an avatar that looked like an idealized version of my physical-world self. Mariannata was a tall brunette with a swingy bob cut and unattainably svelte figure. I made her paler than I am (which is impressive considering my graduate student pallor), choosing the chalkiest of the various white and golden complexions available. She was pretty, if perhaps a bit uninspired, and served to familiarize me with my first entry into an MMO. I abandoned the character at the end of my week-long free trial, having neither the money nor the high-speed internet connection to maintain a presence in the game.

My second foray into the character creation process occurred a few months later as an attempt to maintain a connection with close friends scattered around the country after our college graduation. Most had been playing since the game launched in 2004, so I chose to join their central time-zone server and faction (Horde) rather than return to the fledgling Mariannata and her Alliance (read: white, colonial) sympathies. I chose to create my second character, Aktobe, as an Orc, a race that was arguably the most humanoid of the available Horde characters at that time. I had done almost no research into the game and had only a loose understanding of the game's pre-history and history as I did not play any of the franchise's previous game. The visual clues of the character creation page indicated that my character came from a war-torn and landscape of rocky remains and sparse plains. Blackened spears protruded from behind a fallen banner, and smoke billows around the screen. Despite these clues, I chose to create a pretty Orc--a fact that bothered me throughout my time as this character. After minimal tinkering, Aktobe was short and beautifully muscular when compared to Mariannata; her skin a

saturated teal and her head bald but for a single long braid protruding from the back of her heavily pierced skull. During creation, she would shift her weight and cast a spell, showing her tusks with ferocity, though her eyes stare benignly out from the screen. Aktobe was (and remains, should I choose to renew my subscription fees) an Orc ready to make her mark on her ravaged homeland, though perhaps not in the ways I originally anticipated**.**

It is interesting to note that, despite the contextual clues of Aktobe's creation-screen background, I attempted to create her in the image of my understanding of beauty--an understanding that has for years been shaped by the media and societal expectations to embrace thinness, whiteness, and a feminine (read: non-threatening) facial expression. By subconsciously conforming to this idea of beauty, I underscored the ways in which my character could not possibly be interpreted as "white" (and therefore Alliance or "good"). A real-world understanding of mainstream feminine beauty does not include an overly muscular/compact body, a mostly bald head with turquoise hair, or tusks (no matter how dainty). The ability to customize my avatar allowed me to create a creature that is somewhat-uniquely my own, but cannot achieve beauty or ability outside of the parameters of her code.

While some aspects of the character are customizable (height, skin tone within a limited range, hair style, and facial feature assembly), each race has a specific "look" with only a few options for each customizable feature available. The game's developers lock down the general look and feel for each race. Horde races borrow from various forms of "Otherness" and blackness; these appropriations mark the avatars' bodies, are visible in

their actions, and can be heard/read in the speech patterns of Trolls, Tauren, Goblins, and Orcs. Trolls speak with a stereotypical Jamaican accent, the mystical and earthy Tauren live in Native American inspired huts and tipis while wearing ceremonial dress, while the Orcs dance like backup dancers in a Juvenile music video and MC Hammer. Trolls, Orcs, and Goblins lack the ability to generate characters with pale skin; pigmentation ranges from pale green to dark purple.[16] Horde races in the original, unexpanded *WoW* universe were universally fantastically monstrous; the creators of the game modeled the faction's characters on the mindless, barbaric creatures of Tolkien's oeuvre. More disturbing is that the races composing the Alliance side of the faction binary are all recognizably humanoid and pale skinned; the darkest available skin pigmentation is a dark ash (for humans only).[17] The Humans, Dwarves, Night Elves, and Gnomes of the Alliance all draw from recognizably Western cultural tropes, living in medieval German castles (Humans), performing Irish step-dance (Gnomes), and living in a technologically advanced society complete with subways. The difference between Horde and Alliance cultures could not be more obvious. The game represents humanity and the more recognizably humanoid races as identifiably European and all other cultures as savage Others that are not quite human in either looks or temperament (Higgins 9). Rather than create the possibility for a non-European Human character or allow for a nuanced scattering of individuals across

[16] As the Tauren are bovine, they can generate avatars with a white spotted hide.
[17] Interestingly, Orcs (who are coded as African-American) cannot have brown skin despite the presence of brown skin in earlier games of the Warcraft franchise. Rumors on the WoWwiki website indicate that this color option may become available in the November 2014 expansion to the game, which will include an updated graphics engine and more highly customizable avatars (http://us.battle.net/wow/en/blog/12845268).

both factions, *WoW* distributes the racial signifiers over fantastical races as a stand in for racial difference that reinscribes the White cultural hegemony of the game.

Whether a player chooses to play Horde or Alliance is of little significance to game mechanics; the difference is found in the fact that the game asks the player to commit violence from within and/or on the body of a racial Other. Upon first glance the Horde, coded as racial Others, represent obvious evil while the Alliance represents avenging do-gooders. Even though both factions commit horrible war crimes in order to further their own agendas, the light vs. dark dichotomy pervades throughout every aspect of the game. The game's developers even went so far as to reverse the standard colonial narrative of the light-skinned colonizers displacing dark-skinned natives; in *World of Warcraft*, the dark-skinned, less human creatures are the colonizers of light-skinned natives' land. Not all players, however, are blind to the problems that this reversal creates. In a conversation with a college friend a fellow *WoW* player, KhooKhooKaChoo, she stated: "Well, I've always played Alliance because they're supposed to be the good guys, but I have a problem with that. Both sides commit some really barbaric acts, so I don't think you get to call anyone good. Plus the Horde races have some really neat contributions to world lore that you just don't get to explore as an Alliance character. You only ever get half the story unless you create a toon from another faction, but if I do that I'd never get to play with my guild mates." The binary racial divide, when combined with the social aspect of the game, usually ensures that players who log in for the player community won't switch factions. They find themselves trapped within one side of the narrative—much as I have been with the Horde—and never explore the story from the

opposing side. This places players into ideological silos within the gameworld and severely limits the ability to think otherwise about the game's narrative.

While the creators of the game have not commented on this divisive design decision, most of the players I interviewed assume that such a simple binary was a necessary component for the game's player-versus-player (PvP) battlegrounds. In these spaces, players attack one another rather than environmental mobile enemies (mobs) in controlled and violent games of Capture the Flag and King of the Hill. As players must kill one another to achieve their immediate goals in the battleground, they learn to recognize the silhouette of enemy faction players and to attack those specific bodies on sight. However, as a fellow player pointed out in a December 2012 interview, "that doesn't really make much sense. You can see their [red] nametags from clear across the board way before you can see their bodies."[18] This assumption was further complicated by the addition of the Pandaren race in late 2012. These players in Pandaren avatars have the option of choosing factions at level 10 rather than upon creation, so the round, panda bodies have an equal presence in both the Horde and the Alliance battlegrounds.

Interestingly, *WoW* reinforces its binary with a literal inability to translate between the two cultures of light and dark. Players have the ability to "shout" across battlegrounds by typing "/shout" before their chat comments. These comments are then broadcast to the entirety of the surrounding area (usually a battleground, but sometimes an entire sector of a map). All text from enemy factions, whether currently in battle or

[18] A red nametag above an enemy player or NPC indicates that the player/mob can be attacked or will attack you if you come too near. Yellow tags indicate that the mob will attack if only in retaliation. Green tags indicate a player/NPC that cannot be attacked. Friendly players carry green tags.

not, are immediately translated to a nearly indecipherable gibberish. With time and a user-compiled dictionary, a player can feasibly translate the gibberish English, but the burdensome task of translation indicates that the designers do not desire players to communicate between factions.

This linguistic division serves several purposes. First and foremost, it prevents cross-faction spies from reporting on enemy actions during battleground encounters, thus ensuring that player-vs-player fights remain fair. Second, it prevents players from forming a black market economy within the game world (though one exists on Ebay) as players cannot negotiate prices outside of the non-verbal Auction House screen.[19] Third, and perhaps most important to this study, the language barrier serves as an immediate and tangible example of the "otherness" of a player's enemies. The words lost in translation reinforce the sort of xenophobic zeal that drives players to fight against one another in the first place. This mentality plays upon a popular trope in science fiction--one perhaps most eloquently explained in Orson Scott Card's *Ender's Game:* "If the other fellow can't tell you his story, you can never be sure he isn't trying to kill you" (Card 282). The binary of Horde and Alliance has thus remained a constant through four expansions of the game, no matter what new villains have been introduced.

The Disappearance of Race

[19] Rumors abound about a player who managed to create just such a black market on his game server; the story states that he singlehandedly ruins that server's economy, causing such rampant inflation that the game's designers had to reset the wipe the entire realm clean and begin again. I have been unable to verify whether this is a true story, or an example of an in-game tall tale.

Many players and some critics consider *World of Warcraft* a racially nuanced game, embracing the differences of the different game-races and representing both sides of the racial divide as morally and culturally complex. After all, it offers players a variety of fantasy races (orcs, humans, trolls, elves, goblins, and gnomes to choose from and the ability to personalize each character by slightly altering his/her hair style, facial features, and its skin color. Additionally, the avatarial body serves to conceal any identifiers of player's real-life race that might otherwise alter his/her interactions with others while online, creating a space in which players might pass for a race that they cannot claim in the physical world. We should note, however, that skin tones are customizable only within a limited color spectrum; brown, black, and other dark tones are unavailable. While the avatar creation interface is not as customizable as other games--many of which allow players to completely customize everything from skin tone to age to lip thickness and eye shape--most of the players I have spoken to have expressed satisfaction with their ability to customize their "look" without the need to attend to critical backlash for their choices.

In interviews, players seemed genuinely surprised when I asked them about their character's appearance within the game. Most wanted to talk not about their avatars' bodies, but about the armor that they wore--a status symbol that I will more fully address in Chapter 4. When pressed to comment on the body of the avatar itself, most responded that they simply chose the most attractive assemblage of features possible, though none acknowledged that "attractive" was both highly subjective and, often, difficult to achieve in the more fantastic bovine or undead races. I noticed, however, that no one confessed to

using the "Randomize" button during the character creation process--an act that assembles an avatar for the player and removes the necessity of choice. Players are obviously invested in how their avatar's body looks, but often protested the opposite: "I don't really care about my toon's face," explained Horde player Witchbog, "since I'm almost always looking at her from behind. I really only pay attention to her hair color so I can spot her in a crowd" (Interview December 1, 2012). Another player, Persnoot, commented in a private message that there are "nt [sic] many choices abt looks...nobody cares what ur toon looks like xcept u" (Interview December 3, 2012). However, I frequently noticed that when players in my guild created a new alternate character (alt), they were quick to show off his/her face and form to the rest of the group--a form of digital preening that would border on narcissism in the real-world. The presence of enough face, body, hair, and piercing options on the character creation screen indicates that *WoW* expects their players to care about and take pride in their avatar's looks, no matter what fantasy race they choose to embody.

As I mentioned earlier, there are significant limitations in the character creation process, though it remains unclear whether these limitations were a developer choice or were due to a (by today's standards) unsophisticated graphics engine. Each race offers less than dozen choices of faces, hairstyles, and skin colors. Despite the option to change skin (or hide) color, a character cannot be made to be too dark or too light as it will only be as dark or light as the parameters of the game's code will allow. As the game presents players with only a few options for body and face type, therefore a player can only create a character as outwardly savage or civilized as the developers have decreed, a fact that is

reinforced by the ability to make one's avatar conform to mainstream ideas of beauty.[20] The limitation of choice removes the group-level responsibility for any racial stereotype that the character might project and, according to media theorist Karyn McKinney, allows white players to "respond to such issues with denial, declaring racism the result of racial prejudices" (Dietrich 84).

Returning to an ethnographic example of the racial logic of the gameworld, we can see that its "post-racial" ethos causes players to not only practice racist behaviors but defend them while policing those who critique it. Such behaviors mark the slippage between the virtual-active and social points on the continuum. For example, Orcs, a known evil/demonic in the Tolkien universe, are readily construed as black. They are former slaves, their dances draw from black rap culture, their skin is not white (though not black; green serves as a marker of otherness here), they are tribal, they are savage warmongers who live under a Warchief, and they live in poverty (bone and hide huts). *WoW* developers have tied Orcs to a Western construction of blackness (not just Tolkien's "darkness") in a way that is almost impossible to ignore. It is worth noting that these are the codes for just one of the game's races. When I attempted to discuss my own discomfort with such obvious stereotypes with friends online, the response I received from players Jimboboco and Splatterboom were (respectively)"It's just a game; it's supposed to be fun. Don't read into it so much." and "If you're so offended by the game, why do you keep playing?"(Interview March 16, 2011). These responses blame me, as though recognizing race was an inappropriate diminution of their pleasure. Jimboboco

[20] One might argue that both the Horde and Alliance exhibit savage behaviors throughout the game by killing, maiming, torturing, and stealing in order to advance.

and Splatterboom defended the game's racial logic and sought to protect *the game* from the threat of my critique of its construction. These actions prove that the virtual-active space, where the game's racial logic is disseminated, and the social space, where the game's sanctity as a space of play without consequence, are inherently connected and that the game's racial logics are very much active in both spaces. By placing the onus for recognizing and internalizing racialized representations within the game on me, Jimboboco and Splatterboom absolved themselves of the responsibility for similar recognition and threatened to exclude me from the game. For most of the players I spoke to, the ludic nature of the game creates a curtain of denial behind which the player can hide from what are, I believe, fairly obvious racial statements within the virtual environment. The inability to create a truly black or brown avatar is just one example of such denial.

The avatar creation process ignores the player's physical world race (in fact, it ignores everything except the player's credit card), yet media theorist Tanner Higgins warns us that that ability to customized one's avatar (even within strict limits) is not as enlightened as it might seem. He argues that "these games, although masquerading as progressively engaged through a strategy of colorblindness, function as hegemonic fantasy by filtering the racial imagery that threatens the safety and political coherence of White dominance" (Higgins 6). The encoded bodies of the game reference fantasy tropes and Western racial politics, they also tie each body to both game and physical world histories of colonization and exploitation and construct a racial binary that pits White characters against Others. Even more interesting is the fact that *WoW* not only reifies the

long-held conflict between white and Other, but reverses the traditional colonial narrative. This reversal ensures that the responsibility for the ages-long war falls on the bodies of the dark-skinned Horde characters, effectively endowing the codified White characters within the game with the moral imperative to continue fighting the evil, green, blue, and purple skinned colonizers and actively encouraging a kind of performative hatred of a racially encoded enemy.[21]

Racial Discrimination

As Omi and Winant explain, racial formation--or the "sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed" relates directly to racial discrimination (55). They posit that racial discrimination is a means of control that not only marginalizes a minority group, but becomes the strategy through which the controlling group limits minority freedom of movement within society, potential for upward class mobility, and rate of economic advancement. Perhaps most importantly, racial discrimination has a direct psychological impact on minority self-perception and identity, leading to minority self-confinement within the social expectations imposed upon him/her. Discrimination, to Omi and Winant, is not necessarily conscious, but rather a societal methodology of thought engrained through centuries of assumption and cultural prejudice. Representations of Otherness in the media

[21] I should note here that players would not know this history unless they had played through the entire *Warcraft* franchise (*Warcraft I, II, and III*) or had read the extensive back story of the Orcs in either the *World of Warcraft* novels or on the *WoW Wiki* website. Most of the players I interacted with are not this dedicated to the game's lore; I did not know this history until corrected by a fellow player during the early stages of writing this chapter.

have traditionally depicted minorities as savage, infantilized, naive, or some combination thereof, but those media are not participatory or cooperative ludic experiences.

While *WoW* makes extensive use of cultural stereotypes, phenotypic racial markers, and thinly veiled references to moments in minority histories, the game does not go so far as to create a space of direct racial discrimination. Players of all (in-game) races have the same potential to engage in every aspect of game play; choice of a race marked as "minority" will not alter the player's ability to participate in the game's official and unofficial markets, talk with guild mates, and run through the gameworld in a never-ending killing spree. (Though we should note that a player's real-world access to the funds to pay for a game subscription and somewhat sophisticated computer as well as the leisure time to play are factors that may prevent him/her from joining the game.) *WoW* has created racial divisions, but has not imposed the societal strictures that limit racial minorities or players who choose to embody racial Others in the game. I argue that the lack of limitation based on race in the game's programming does nothing to deter players from imposing their own real-world racial biases on the game; the structure of the avatarial races encourages the player to equate racially coded avatars with racially coded real-world bodies. Furthermore, the game's lore demands acts of violence against bodies coded with real-world racial identities and justifies perceptions of white superiority in that space.

If we return for a moment to the game's lore, you may recall that *WoW*'s racial divide is colonial in nature. The dark Orcs are the invaders in our story of colonization, and the white Humans (and their ilk--dwarves and gnomes) are the innocent and native

defenders of their homeland. This blatant reversal of the racial histories and politics of dark-skinned and light-skinned peoples in the real world justifies white outrage and privilege while erasing the histories of white imperialism against indigenous peoples and peoples of colors around the world. The conflict of whiteness against Otherness is justified by the imperial nature of the Orcs who lead the Horde races, and the feeling of righteousness that accompanies this structure carries beyond the game's battlegrounds. Media scholar Jessica Langer explains that she has encountered players who:

> eagerly expand their conflicts with players of the opposing faction from play-fights dictated by game mechanics to emotionally charged in-character battles, using the familiarity/otherness code posited by the game and its lore, often extending beyond the strict boundaries of gameplay[...] This practice, while a natural and even encouraged outgrowth of the richness of the virtual gameworld, can have serious repercussions: the "hatred and bigotry" that both I experienced [...was directed] not only toward players of the opposing faction, but players of an opposing faction that closely represents a real-world marginalized culture (99).

In-game racial coding therefore translates to the exclusion and policing of real-life Others in the social realm of the game. This extension is due in part to the fact that the avatarial races that comprise the Horde are recognizably less human than the white, humanoid races of the Alliance. The game therefore "excludes those real-world players whose cultural markers are represented by in-game non-humans *instead of* in-game humans" (Langer 104). I would extend that argument that any marker of the player’s real-life racial or cultural difference visible within the game marks the player for insult and ridicule.

The game's racial coding and logic therefore led me to believe that everyone within the space must be a member of the game's target audience as no one chose to speak out against the problematic stereotypes the game portrayed. The game established itself as a space of whiteness and positioned players as implicitly race, even if they elected to embrace and embody Otherness by choosing avatar coded as an Other. I therefore assumed that each player I encountered was young (teen or college aged), white, middle class, and male until a vocal or textual introduction proved otherwise. I continued to invest in this belief throughout the seven years of my time as an active player despite the objective knowledge that the real-life identities of my fellow players were as diverse as my own. Though primarily white or white-privileged, some of the most prominent and active members of the guild were Chinese-Canadian, African-American, Korean-American, and South American. I discovered the nationalities and cultural heritage of these players through two means: through small vocal tells and inadvertent hints in VOIP conversations (a slight accent, a foreign language in the background, a time-zone difference) and through my own incessant curiosity (I asked). While I never deliberately treated these players differently, my questions were a matter of public conversation as they were delivered in general chat; I noted white player attitudes sometimes shifted subtly when a player revealed a deviation from the assumed norm. In particular I noticed that women, once "outed", were treated as less-informed gamers and offered tutorials from male guild leaders. I benefited from several of these offers in my early days in the guild, but found that, over time, these offers grated as they implied that I was a gamer of lesser status (or a n00b/newbie). As I perform whiteness within the digital

space, the experience of having my abilities questioned due to my gender has become the primary method through which I can visit the topic of open discrimination through my own ethnographic account. I have justified this shift from race to gender by employing Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality and its focus on the fact that the various layers of our identities cannot be analyzed independently; I am never solely mixed-race, white privileged, solely a woman, solely an intellectual, or solely middle-class but always a hybrid creature of all those identifiers. I have chosen to mobilize this term as Patricia Collins did in *Black Feminist Thought,* as a way of reminding us that "oppression cannot be reduced to one fundamental type, and that oppressions work together in producing injustice" (18). I don't wish to claim that racial and gender discrimination are equivalent to one another, but rather to name the fact that the mechanisms of one exist in the other, though I acknowledge here that intersectionality, as a methodology, has received considerable criticism from black feminist theorists (from whence the theory sprang in the early 1980s); white feminists' use of the term to discuss their own marginalization as women, but not as differently raced, is considered by many a bastardization of the term. I am employing it here as a method to recognize that I operate from a position of privilege while still recognizing the ways in which *WoW* (and in this case, the players of my guild) marginalizes women through mechanisms both similar to and inextricably entwined with those by which it marginalizes non-white players. To do so, I must first turn my attention to the composition of the game's player population.

Regardless of the actual composition of its online membership, the game assumes that its audience will be both white *and* male and has thus presented that audience with a

game that reinforces a race-war dynamic and heteronormative behavior. The one unofficial census of *WoW*, Nick Yee's 2005 *Daedalus Project*--an unofficial and long-running survey study of player demographics-- reveals that 84% of sampled players were male (Yee, "Daedalus Project"). Several blogs and forums place the numbers of women in *WoW* at closer to 30%, though the more vocal nature of women in VOIP channels might skew those numbers in their favor. This would place the percent of female *WoW* players below the number of female gamers in general (45% of the overall gaming population), but it's difficult to make such comparisons on outdated information. Regardless, women are in the minority in the virtual space and most of the game is organized around entertaining and retaining the subscriptions of its male players. Avatarial bodies within *WoW* are exaggerated and hyper-sexualized. Men appear heroic--the males of most races appear as broad-shouldered, muscular, and either stoic (Alliance) or fierce (Horde). Women, on the other hand, have universally large breasts and hourglass figures. The objectification of the female body--and frequent comments on "tits and ass" from male players--also reify the heteronormative nature of the space. In interviews with several male players, I asked if they felt playing a female avatar could be considered a form of drag. Every subject answered with an immediate (and defensive) "no", but the most articulate answer came from my (then) guild leader, FezBrix. He responded:

> Im [sic] going to spend 6-8 hours each night running around behind my character. I could spend that time staring at a dude, or I could spend it looking at a hot piece of ass. What would you choose? (Interview, February 15, 2011)

Fez's objectification of his avatar extended beyond admiring her posterior. In public spaces such as the Horde capital, Orgrimmar, Fez (and many other, unidentified players) would regularly stand on top of a fence post, remove his armor, and make his avatar dance. Removing a character's armor strips him or her down to either a bikini (female) or shorts (male). Many of the female dances are highly provocative. Fez's Blood Elf was effectively standing on a raised platform stripped to her skivvies and dancing like Britney Spears. FezBrix often did this when there was a lull in his evening or when he was short on cash. Passersby would often stop and give him a small amount of money for the performance. When I asked whether Fez considered this performance a form of objectification, he replied "its not like it's a real body. if my toon looked like britney spears [instead of just mimicking her dances] it would be another story. It isnt my body to display then. but this is just random parts—not a real person" (Interview Feb 15, 2011). Despite his attachment to his character, Fez clear understood her as a puppet or tool to manipulate at will and did not associate the objectification of the female form with the objectification of women in general.

The overt presence of the (straight) male gaze within *WoW* effectively marks the game as a male space. While FezBrix later defended the presence of hyper-feminine avatars in the space by countering that the hyper-masculine characters were just as ripe for objectification, I would argue that embodying a male avatar is less about objectification and more about the satisfaction of a thirst for power. The broad, strong, rough, stoic male characters of *WoW* imply ability rather than virility, while the female characters do not imply any particular prowess in either combat or magic. While the

characters are, in fact, equally powerful when it comes to actual performance in the game, the female avatars are the only digital representations whose skills might come as a surprise to the casual observer. Female avatars give every appearance of being objects for consumption rather than objects for identification, marking the space as unwelcoming for most women. Upon stepping into the game world, women gamers can immediately recognize that the space was not designed for their consumption. [22] However, this hypothesis would also imply that while male players objectify their female avatars, female players identify with them; the reverse, however, is not true.[23]

Othered or other gendered players might crave something other than a hyper-masculine space of racial privilege, but they are unlikely to be satisfied. The animations that initially define the space as white, straight, and male pervade nearly every aspect of game interaction. Players behave as though their peers are white, male, and straight--even if they do not fit that mould themselves, as a failure to adhere to acceptable standards of race/class/gender behavior results in a loss of social capital within the social group of the guild. Throughout my tenure as a *WoW* player, I assumed that each player was a young white male until proven otherwise--despite being a young, white-privileged female. This assumption in the virtual-active space seeps into the social space--a prime example of the reversal of flow from the virtual end of the continuum toward the real. Because players assume that all others fit into the game's racial mold, they tend to be largely unaware of the effects of their speech on those who are not the intended audience. Racial epithets,

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[22] We should note that *WoW* is considerably obvious about their manipulation of the female form than many other popular games. The *Soul Calibur* series has an animator dedicated entirely to breast mechanics. His task is to ensure realistic bounce and sway. *WoW* bosoms are stationary.

[23] Need to provide equivalent anecdote regarding Racial performance

homophobic slurs, and sexual harassment abound, marking the space as a white "boys club" in which membership implies a tacit acceptance of often insulting language and behavior. Male players don't just employ offensive language to mark the digital territory as a masculine space--they audibly burp, fart, grunt, and talk about masturbation as a method of alienating female players; objections to such behavior are generally met with jeers and somewhat malicious insults. One conversation in particular illustrates the potential consequences of interventions that highlight either the white hegemonic or a player's deviation from the assumed audience of the game.

The Pedagogy of Digital Performance

World of Warcraft is first and foremost a space of teaching and learning. The social structure of the game is such that players are expected to help newer or less able players learn how to play the game efficiently and effectively--a topic that I will explore further in Chapter 4. I would also argue, though, that the social space of the guild is a pedagogical space the instructs the player on the proper performance of personal identity, particularly as a method of policing behaviors that obviously mark the player as not white, male, or heterosexual and correcting those behaviors so that a player might be accepted by their guild mates. The following ethnographic account describes my own experience of in-game training to correct behaviors that marked me as divergent from the accepted form of female game in a guild.

I had been playing for nearly a year and had hit level 60 (then the level cap) only moments before when I was invited to join my first guild. The guild, “Found This

Humerus" (FTH), welcomed me with open arms and was quick to find me a place in a dungeon run so I could begin building a decent set of armor for my character. Before joining the guild, my only experience of the game was through performing quests on my own, so my role as a member of a five-man group attempting to complete a dungeon was both new and intimidating. I quickly discovered that as much time gets devoted to chat as to the actually killing of monsters, and settled in to get to know some of my new guild mates.

As an inexperienced dungeon runner, I performed poorly in the small group. My armor was not adequate for the level of boss and I didn't understand my spells well enough to know what to use in any given situation. One of the guild members, PurplePete, was quick to point out my shortcomings and hurled a number of epithets at my feet--each one seeking to feminize what he thought was a male player. I'm afraid I have never been a particularly patient person when it comes to insults against my gender. I quipped that "I am a girl Pete and implying that my gender is an insult is just ignorant." Pete quickly changed tactics. His immediate response was "blow me," but he quickly stooped to whispered insults in private messages that no one else could see. These messages were explicit and invited me to perform a variety of lewd and anatomically impossible acts with or for Pete. I had not encountered this kind of blatant sexual harassment within *WoW* (or any game space) before. Stunned, I quickly reported the conversation to my new guild leader and e-mailed him a screenshot (image capture) of the conversation. My guild leader immediately booted PurplePete from the guild and apologized for Pete's behavior. While my guild leader acknowledged that Pete's behavior

was in no way acceptable, he also indicated that I shouldn't have responded to Pete's initial insults. "dont fan the flames Aktobe. ur going to see a lot of guys like that in this game but not to [sic] many here I hope." My membership in FTH wasn't two hours old.

By demonstrating his willingness to rid the guild of offensive players, my guild leader won my loyalty; I didn't question his admonishment of my responses to Pete and decided that I could afford to be a bit less aggressively defensive of my gender while online. I felt that this was a place where I could play with welcoming individuals, have some fun, and make some friends. In the coming weeks, I learned how to improve my playing style from my guild leader (who also happened to play a Warlock). I learned to participate as a part of a dungeon group and to support other players with my skillset. I gathered several pieces of armor that ensured my survival in these dungeons. During this time, I also learned more about the people I played with--most were second and third shift workers at local factories. A few were fledgling computer security specialists or hardware specialists. A few were stay-at-home Moms and the wives of more active players. The discovery that my guild worked in largely male-dominated fields--tractor factories, assembly lines, and the computer industry-- and that many lived in conservative, rural areas (Iowa, Oklahoma, Nebraska, and Louisiana) failed to raise any red flags at first. I recognized that I was the only unmarried, fully employed, highly educated woman in the group and therefore a bit of an anomaly in the guild, but didn't think that my staunchly middle-class, highly educated, liberal background would cause social issues. I was wrong. I quickly learned that being an anomaly in a virtual world is not a safe space to occupy.

Near the end of my first month in the guild, my leader--the same man who had defended me against a snide misogynist college student just a few weeks before--took me aside and explained that my behavior in the guild, while not breaking any rules, had raised some eyebrows. Among my transgressions were: (a) speaking too much and too freely in guild chat, (b) carrying on too many personal conversations, (c) talking too much about outside hobbies such as carpentry and shooting, (d) talking too much about my work, specifically anything referring to my Master's Thesis. In short, I had failed to fit into the guild's community and had made a spectacle of my identity--could I please tone it down a bit and not seek so much attention.

I have come to realize that my guild leader's tutelage in both game play and unofficial guild chat protocol were a form of pedagogy aimed at shaping my behavior in the virtual space. As a player, I earned his respect; I learned quickly and began to research the fighting tactics of my character so that I could improve further. As a member of a social group, however, I had failed to blend. Rather than mimicking the quieter, more subdued tones and topics of the young mothers in my guild--talking about my (non-existent) children, my (non-existent) husband, or listening to the chatter of the more vocal men-- I had mimicked the behavior of the men. I talked about my work, my family, and myself. (The fact that I was, at that point in my life, an unfiltered and often overly brash person in the real-world did not help my cause.) In short, I failed to adhere to the form of femininity most commonly accepted in that space. In order to remain as a member of the guild, my performance of femininity and of class (education) had to shift. With several years' perspective, I came to realize that the alterations I made to my performance of

gender and of class could constitute a form of passing--an act that directly applies to the performance of race in the guild space as well.[24]

Passing in WoW

My failure to adhere to the unspoken standards of gender and class in *World of Warcraft* amounts to a failure to recognize the game as a space of whiteness. In hindsight, I should have been as savvy about my place as a young, white, middle-class, educated, and liberal female as I was about my place in the real world. I spent my formative years in an environment in which these attributes were in the minority--my childhood home in South Texas is largely Latino and Black, blue-collar, semi-educated, and conservative. I negotiated that space with care for the first 18 years of my life, but neglected to exercise that same care when logging into *WoW*. This is partly because *WoW* encourages the player to leave their real-world race at the door in order to don the racial identity of one of its fantastical avatars, but it is also partly because my inexperience with interactive gaming at that point in time meant that I did not understand the necessity of "passing" in that space.

The act of passing refers to a person of one identity group being accepted as a member of another identity group; the term traditionally applies to mixed-race heritage individuals passing as a member of the white majority--particularly during the Jim Crow era of "one drop". Passing is, at its core, a social deception. It enables a person to adopt

[24] This is by no means a universal experience. I have spoken to several players who were members of female led and unbelievably hospitable guilds. While I do not believe that such guilds are the norm in *WoW*, it is important to note that they both exist and thrive.

new roles or identities and to eschew the limitations of a less "desirable" minority group. Members of a majority group tend to view the act of passing (or, as legal scholar Kenji Yoshino terms it, "covering") as threatening to the homogenous nature of their cultural group. The fear of passing is a fear of infiltration, the fear of a loss of privilege, and the fear of having to alter one's behavior to accept the unknown. Within *World of Warcraft*, I believe the fear of passing is the fear that the presence of an Other (non-white, non-male, non-straight) will complicate the "fun time" of online gaming with un-fun critical analysis...or at least burden the (assumed) white majority with the necessity of politically correct language and behavior in that space. This threat is at its highest is players refuse to pass in the only space; those who are most outspoken about the claims of their identities are often those who are most maligned within the guild space.

As I have explained in this chapter, *WoW* is a space built on a myth of white dominance--so much so that it has reversed the colonial histories of maligned races in the real world to justify white moral superiority in the digital space. *WoW* tells the story of a "native" white population controlling their environs and building a series of medieval principalities. This is a myth of white superiority, and therefore a space of performative whiteness (no matter what race of avatar a player chooses to embody). This narrative structure tells players who fail to fit into the category of white, heterosexual male that they are unwelcome in that space--the very structure of the game precludes their inclusion unless they can conform to the acceptable performances of race, gender, class, and sexuality that shape the game world. Those who do fit into the majority target player group reinforce these desires by making the space undesirable to any who might demand

that the dynamic of white, male, heterosexual superiority change. Players habitually use language deemed offensive in the real world, referring to raping (winning by a large margin), getting Jewed (losing by a large margin), and using racial slurs commonly found in the US military (sand-niggers, ragheads, chinks and spics).[25] Male players engage in a form of jocularity commonly found in frat houses, openly talking about masturbation, sexual encounters or desired sexual encounters, and by burping, farting, and generally making offensive bodily noises into the microphone while in voice chat. The game even allows for the player to make their avatar perform such bodily acts; typing "/fart" while targeting another player will generate a line of text that reads "[avatar name] brushes up against [target player name] and farts loudly." *WoW* is a space for boys, and those who complain about such antics are viewed as spoilsports or overly finicky "Mommies".

I believe that these behaviors serve as a defense against those who refuse to "pass" and mix with the crowd within the game. The presence of women or minorities in the real world requires that a white, heterosexual male adhere to strict standards of behavior lest he be slapped with a sexual harassment or discrimination suit. The very whiteness of the digital ludic space removes such strictures and allows the player to refuse to adhere to such societal standards. This is a form of control that is impossible to exercise in the real world, and it grants the majority group players the ability to police race, gender, and class performance within the game. Such freedom of expression (for the white majority) can become addicting.

[25] I believe some of this language may be due to the fact that many players are military or former military. Nearly 25% of the subjects I interviewed in this study served in the US Army or Air Force.

Conclusion

World of Warcraft is a playful space that goes to great lengths to present itself as racially diverse. While the game succeeds in offering players a wide variety of playable races, the game's backstory and its own methods of marking race indicate that the developers are creating from a privileged position of white habitus--a position that is then extended to the players who embody avatars and socialize online. Though *WoW* presents itself as a post-racial space—a place where the effects of institutional racism do not apply and where there are no limitations to a character's ability to achieve in the game—but the ability to inhabit both fantasy bodies and human bodies creates an automatic binary in which all bodies are measured by their deviation from humanness (and therefore whiteness). Adding additional coding of in the form of stereotypical dances and the art/architecture of real world Others (primarily black of Native American) creates a space where players naturalize Otherness as non-human, subordinate to white humanness. This reinforces a sense of white superiority within the game, a fact that is augmented by a reversal of the traditional colonial narrative of white colonizer subjugating Othered native.

This racial logic becomes so ingrained that many players will defend any criticism of the problematic narrative and, in so doing, seek to exclude critically aware players who might seek to alter the game's narrative or bring it up in conversation as a negative aspect of the game. The racial logic verifies already ingrained understandings of racial difference and white superiority, and as such any player who criticizes it is a threat to the white, male player's "fun" while in the virtual space. Players are therefore required to

pass as white or sympathetic toward ideas of white superiority while in the online social space, for fear that an open conversation about racial essentialization may threaten their ability to participate in the game and accrue cultural capital (a fact that I will examine in greater detail in Chapter 4).

As a mixed-race woman who codes as white and therefore enjoys white privilege, but many critical questions in this space, I was often subjected to the animosity of my fellow players when I dared to question why racial encoding is such a prominent part of *WoW's* online culture. My failure to recognize the necessity of passing in the virtual space made me a dangerous player, for my questions opened a space where the validity of *WoW* as a space of whiteness would be called into question.

Chapter 3: Crafting Whiteness: Embodiment and Immersion at War

> *In order to fully enjoy and experience a fantasy role playing game, there has to be a high sense of immersion. Immersion requires that you abide by the rules of the game world and the story.*
>
> *Immersion does not require you to role play, but in a sense everyone who is playing a character is also playing a role and takes on an identity congruent with the game world. You become someone else, if only for the content and the action that the game already provides.*
>
> --Lestele, in a Battle.net forum post
>
> December 12, 2011

During my seven-year tenure as a dedicated *World of Warcraft* player, I spent over 402 days (nearly 30 hours per average week) logged into the game in the form of a short, violent, magic-wielding, green-skinned Orc named Aktobe.[26] As an alter-ego, Aktobe provided me with an anonymous body through which I could enter a digital realm and escape the often mundane reality of my quotidian responsibilities. I spent hours each day developing a character for my avatar, an identity for my guild alter ego, and traversing the spaces between the two in the countless interactions with other players and

[26] Names throughout this study have been changed to protect the anonymity of fellow players.

non-player characters of the virtual space. In the time I spent online, I committed acts that would result in a war crimes trial in the physical world--often while chatting about my day or exchanging recipes with friends.

World of Warcraft is a fantasy world in which players have the opportunity to role-play a heroic adventurer in a variety of scenarios and quests. The world is an open sandbox game, so players can choose the order and location of their online achievement; however, players are rarely afforded the opportunity to choose what goals their quests contain. Nearly every adventure includes acts of violence such as beast slaying, humanoid torture, and murder, either as a means to an end (a supply item or information) or as the end itself (assassination, genocide, or simply species eradication). While these acts are disturbing when we see them written in black and white, they feel both acceptable and necessary within the context of the active play space. The designers of *WoW* constructed a world that invites and encourages its players to wallow in these ethically questionable practices by presenting thousands of opportunities to maim or kill for social and economic profit. *WoW*'s use of violence, and indeed nearly all videogame violence, has become a controversial topic within society at large. It seems that nearly every violent act committed by a teenager or young adult turns our collective eyes toward videogames—and their desensitized, overly gory depiction of physical of bloodshed—as the model from which real-world atrocities spring. I do not believe there is a one-to-one correlation between in-game and real-world violence, no matter how questionable I find these depictions of violence personally. Videogame violence is not real violence; injury

and death are not permanent states and populations recover from virtual decimation within minutes.

As I argued in the previous chapter, *WoW* engages with the idea of race through a series of essentialized visual representations, through coded patterns of speech and movement, and through the artifacts and architecture that build the landscape of the virtual world. In contrast, this chapter analyzes how players with different physical world identities inhabit/experience the game and how they navigate its racial logic. While never explicitly named as such, the game asks players to embody avatars that recognizably belong to a group of white-bodied characters or to a group of minority-bodied characters where green and brown bodies replace our understanding of brown and black. Virtual racism rehearses practices of real-world racism by asking players to perform the same acts of discrimination that they would outside of the game. Players profile one another, make judgments based on skin color or other phenotypic markers, and perform acts of violence on bodies visually marked as other-than-white. Their actions carry beyond those demanded in active game play; within the virtual environment, players interact across multiple levels of sociality, engaging the game content and one another simultaneously through the liminal persona of the avatar. These experiences take place within an *interaction continuum*, a term that I have employed to describe the fluctuating state of embodiment the player inhabits as s/he travels through the game space(s). As I explained in the introduction to this project, the interaction continuum operates between the physical, the social, and the virtual-active realms; the player slips between these two extremes and is nearly always in one or more realms simultaneously. In this chapter, I

focus my attention on the game's role in shaping a player's social behaviors across these multiple levels of sociality and the roles both immersion and embodiment play in the absorption of in-game social mores. More specifically, I discuss how these mores traverse the various realms of experience on what I term the interaction continuum. I propose that the conditions of immersion and embodiment/habitus that prevail while gaming mean that there is a great deal of traffic between the identities any given player may have in the virtual, social, and physical realms--there is a bleed between these that has consequences, given the atavistic racial imagination imposed by the game. This can make for a jarring, conflicted experience for many players, where physical world identities chafe irreconcilably against game logic. However, the game also trains players to accept certain racial conditions and habituate themselves to them.

I examine the player's understanding of self in both virtual and real contexts. I rely on Michel Foucault's definition of the *techniques of the self* as "those reflexive and voluntary practices by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct, but seek to transform themselves to change themselves in their singular being, and to make of their life into an *oeuvre* that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria" (Foucault Sexuality II 10-11). Foucault's description refers more to the aesthetic formation of selfhood--a position that many scholars acknowledge operates from a state of privilege. However, I focus on the first half of Foucault's statement, that individuals fashion themselves into selves that have "a distinctive shape and individual style" (Ball 179). This is largely an ethical practice that consists as much of a shaping of personal ideology and opinion as it does of personal aesthetics. Therefore, my understanding of

selfhood for this study refers to the shaping of a player's opinions, motivations, values and limitations as a whole--that which makes the individual person in the "real" world--in relation to the aesthetic style of a digital avatar. I question how that understanding changes when the player inhabits the body of a racial other in a space that naturalizes an ethos of white privilege. What does it mean to perform acts of violence in the body of a recognizable Other? What does it mean to perform that violence *against* an Other? This chapter examines how the conditions of experience in the virtual space shape an understanding of self in any given space on the aforementioned interaction continuum—a visual representation that I created to better understand a player's movement between the realms of the social and the virtual active as s/he usually occupies the liminal space between the two. Selfhood serves as an optic for drawing together the experiences of immersion, identity, and embodiment within the game.

In order to address the collision of so many terms--violence, selfhood, Otherness, and the realms of interaction contained within *WoW*-- I draw on foundational theories from new media, performance, and social science scholarship. I rely in particular on media theorists James Gee, Lisa Nakamura, and Zach Waggoner to inform my understanding of the issues of identity, embodiment, and immersion in the interactive real. In particular, I cite Gee's separation of the virtual, real, and projective selves in order to help me theorize how subjects move between realms of interaction--carrying racial experiences, motives, behaviors, and biases with them. These selves refer to the game player, complete with real-world biases and motivations (real), the avatarial self, a digital being with in-game biases and motivations (virtual), and the combination of the two,

where the game player adopts and internalizes the biases and motivations of the avatar and blends them with his or her own real-world motivations (projective). However, I would argue that the player must negotiate the various selves as s/he moves within the interaction continuum; the selves cannot be firmly mapped to the positions of the continuum as movement between the modes of interaction keeps a player's identity in a constant state of flux. This instability allows for the seepage of the ideologies from one space of interaction into the others.

Gee's (and later, Waggoner's) clear distinction between the three identities is helpful for explaining how players respond to stimuli in both the virtual and real worlds, however both theorists neglect to account for the flow of motivations and cultural concepts from the game world into the physical through the conduit of the avatar and concentrate instead on the flow of real-world motivations into the projective self alone. I will address this unexamined flow of ideology later in this chapter. However, expanding the definitions of digital embodiment and virtual identity are not ends in and of themselves. Here I focus on how players objectify and take ownership of the bodies that they "rent" while playing the game and how they perceive the racial attributes of those bodies in relation to their physical world selves. I question the stakes for racial embodiment in the context of a world-at-perpetual-war and the affects of forming a "third self", or virtual identity under such conditions. Finally, I discuss how the slippage between the various realms of interaction creates a space for ideologies from one space to flow into another.

The Interaction Continuum

Despite the fact that *WoW* is a discrete, stand-alone world that comes complete with its own social and economic rules, play does not take place in one specific mode of interaction. The game divides into overlapping realms, which I have termed the real, the social, and virtual-active and which is each always in operation in the player's experience. The following vignette serves as an example of the play between the various realms of interaction and illustrates that a player may experience facets of all three realms simultaneously.

It is midnight on a Sunday and I should really be preparing to sleep, but I still have nearly 200 online quizzes and forum responses to read and grades to enter for a course I'm teaching online. I spent two hours in WoW *tonight running dungeons with a few of the newer players of the guild—a part of my duties as a guild leader and usually a fun activity as well—but I don't think I budgeted my time wisely. Now I'm grading after midnight again.*

I've stayed logged into TeamSpeak (a VOIP service) and my character is set up for fishing in the Twilight Highlands. I know that multitasking between conversation, fishing, and grading mid-terms isn't the most efficient way to get my work done, but the forum responses are quick reads and the quizzes are multiple choice, so I justify my choice with the fact that they won't require absolute concentration. I tell myself that listening to my friends on TeamSpeak is no different than trying to work in a crowded

coffee shop and that virtual fishing isn't terribly taxing either. Yes, it will slow my grading some, but it should make the process a bit more enjoyable.

The TeamSpeak conversations aren't very active as it's after midnight. Only the more dedicated players are on (and most of them are on the West Coast anyway—I'm in the Central Time Zone). FezBrix and Merryweather are speculating about some of the changes that have been announced for the next software patch, so I'm glad I opted to stay online. I haven't had much time to read through the patch notes or research the changes that well have an effect on me, so the conversation is a great opportunity to ask questions. I have my character drop her line in the water and watch the 30 second progress bar pop up, then turn my eyes to the quiz on my second monitor. I listen for the small "sploosh" that signals that a fish is on the line and click my mouse to reel it in. I use my left hand on the mouse button so that the right hand can hold my red grading pen. I don't need to look at the screen to reel in or re-cast.

I don't really participate in the TeamSpeak conversation for the first ten or so minutes. I speed through the quizzes, noting down scores in my grade book, only occasionally forgetting about my fishing character on the screen. The system seems to be working until my guild leader starts talking about the patch's changes to the warlock.

FezBrix: "Hey Aktobe, you still there?"

Me: "Yeah, just listening in and fishing. What's up?"

F: "Just wondering what you thought of the patch notes for the [war]lock."

Me: "I haven't read them yet. That's why I'm listening in. Anything that I should be looking out for?"

F:"They're nerfing[27] affliction. You're gonna want to switch to destro[28] as your main spec for the next patch."

Me: "Damn. Thanks for telling me. Aktobe is currently affliction and destro, but maybe I'll switch her to destro and demonology after they update."

F: "Demonology is going to be nerfed too. You'll probably want to just keep it and switch to destroy as your main in dungeons."

Me: "Cool. Thanks."

The conversation continues, but I continue to participate in it rather than half-listening as I fish. I forget to re-cast my line more and more often, catching fewer fish, as I attempt to divide my attention between an active conversation and the grading in front of me. By two in the morning I have completed the quizzes, caught enough fish to level my character's skill by more than twenty points, learned about the upcoming changes to warlocks and shamans (my alternate character), and contributed to a conversation on the next guild event. Calling that a productive night, I sign off so I can focus my attention on forum responses. As much as I'd like to keep chatting with the guys online, I have to get started on forum responses if I'm going to have them completed by Wednesday's class meeting.

This description is typical of a late evening in *WoW*—a time where I generally tried to multitask between a real-world activity (work, watching a movie, talking on the

[27] "Nerfing" refers to the act of making a character or a set of powers less powerful. The term comes from the popular Nerf toys—a series of soft, foam weapons that cause no damage when launched at another person. By nerfing affliction, *WoW*'s producers are taking a skill specialization (affliction, the casting of virulent curses at an enemy and killing them through a slow leeching of health) and making it less effective. The term nerfing is often used in conjunction with the term OP, or over-powered, referring to skills or skill specializations as being noticeably more effective than those of other character classes.

[28] Destruction specialization.

phone), conversations in either TeamSpeak or guild text-chat, and actively playing the game (though not always complex in-game activities). Because *World of Warcraft* is a game that takes place in real-time, there is often considerable downtime during active play. Travel between various parts of the continent, for example, can take upwards of 10 minutes (for a long flight). I often chose to spend this time in conversation with other players, but when conversation was in short supply (when other players were logged off) a real-world activity often occupied that space (generally reading a book, skimming an article for class, or watching a DVD on a second monitor). Participating in several levels of game interaction simultaneously is an example of inhabiting the interaction continuum (a phrase not to be confused with Gordon's Calleja's immersion continuum, which I will address later in this chapter).

I rely on a Venn diagram to demonstrate the interrelated nature of the three realms of interaction within *WoW*. The continuum helps us visualize the various realms of interaction not as discreet and firmly bounded, but as overlapping and coalescing spaces; presence in one space does not preclude a simultaneous presence in another. We might imagine that the player must think, act, and rationalize across three realms of interaction, always responding to the individual stimuli of all three spaces. It is impossible for a player to exist in one space alone as long as they play the game; they are always necessarily a part of each of the three to some extent. In fact, I posit that successful navigation of this particular virtual world requires attendance to and immersion in each of the realms simultaneously; the game experience is incomplete without the influence of each of these realms. Players may attend to one realm more completely depending on

what action they are performing in the game at any given time, but they are always physically situated in the real realm, connected to (even if not actively participating in) the social realm, and embodied within their avatar whenever they are logged into the game. This means players are maintaining conversations with friends and guild mates while performing repetitive in-game quests or preparing for battle. Rather than serving as a buffer between the physical and the virtual-active, the social realm often serves as a channel for the ideologies of each to travel with the player as he or she moves back and forth on the interaction continuum. Additionally, no matter how many or which realms the player occupies, there is always a sense of greater presence within the game as a whole; the three worlds do not appear as discreet as I have defined them here, but as aspects of a holistic game experience in which the player immerses his/herself.

The Importance of Immersion

World of Warcraft is an immersive environment in the sense that it transports the player to a self-contained and complete world and social system. The digital space provides high levels of sensorial realism, creating the effect of the player's being submerged within the text of the game, effectively becoming "lost to the world" as they play the game. We must understand immersion because it is the absorption in the game world that allows the player to distance him or herself from not only the actions they commit as both an embodied avatar and as a member of a social space. Immersive experiences justify a player's actions in the virtual world and allow him/her to log off and resume their life in the real world without guilt or consequence.

How a player immerses him/herself is a matter of some debate amongst new media scholars. Games scholar Gordon Calleja comments that the term can apply to a diverse group of experiential phenomena including "general engagement, perception of realism, addiction, suspension of disbelief, identification with game characters, and more" (25). He focuses his attention on two of the primary definitions: *immersion as absorption* and *immersion as transportation*. The former defines immersion as less a sensory event and relies heavily on the *Oxford English Dictionary* definition of immersion as "absorption in some condition, action, interest, etc." (26), while the latter defines immersion as a condition that "draws players so deeply into the game world that they feel as if they are part of it"--a figurative transportation to another time and (digital) space (25). Both of these definitions, while fairly concrete, present problems when used to analyze digital media. As Calleja posits, *immersion as absorption* makes no distinction to the difference in types of media--one can be equally immersed in a good book, a TV show, a football match, or a crossword puzzle, a definition that almost completely dismisses the dynamic nature of digital games as a representational medium. *Immersion as transportation*, however, operates under what media scholars Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman term the "immersion fallacy": "the idea that the pleasure of a media experience lies in its ability to sensually transport the participant into an illusory, simulated reality", and that the representational mimesis of the physical world within the digital space provides the vehicle for such transportation (451-52). This assumption neglects to factor in the fact that a) no player is ever *completely* immersed within the digital realm as some part remains at least partially aware of his/her physical

surroundings and b) representational mimesis is not the most engaging aspect of game play.

Immersion relies on a player/audience experiencing some form of presence with the medium that they are engaged with. Calleja, whose 2011 book on game immersion remains the most comprehensive analysis of the state to date, recognizes that his definitions are inadequate explanations of the experience of game immersion and I believe this is partly because he has not addressed the issue of presence in the digital space. He posits that, rather than being a binary state, immersion itself exists on a continuum that is not necessarily determined by the sophistication of any given game technology, but by the types of phenomena the player experiences in game (33). Theatre scholar Josephine Machon has likewise stated that the definitions of "immersion" are inadequate and have been too broadly applied to a variety of performance styles. Immersion in performance, Machon posits:

> Today "immersive" is used with impunity to describe a movement that is occurring in contemporary performance practice towards a visceral and participatory audience experience with an all-encompassing sensual style of production aesthetic (66).

She clarifies that immersive theatre should not be confused with interdisciplinary, site-specific, or promenade theatres and that it should be "discernible as that practice which actually allows you to be in 'the playing area' with the performers, physically interacting with them", effectively implying that presence (in this case a physical one) is the necessary component to make an immersive experience genuine (67). Machon's focus is

inherently theatrical, which explains her emphasis on *physical* presence in performance. However, I would argue that there are distinct similarities between these forms as the interaction between players in the digital space is a form of embodied corporeality. The Blast Theory performance group has in fact played with digital space as a mediated performance environment with some success (*Day of the Figurines*, 2006). While not an organized or scripted theatrical performance between players, online interactions are certainly performative and serve to help the player feel present within the space. Player interactions with both other players and with NPCs happen in real time and are largely unscripted, which makes the player feel immersed within a performative conversation.

While for the most part I agree with both Calleja's and Machon's assessments of the term "immersion", I believe that there are gaps in their definitions of the term, whether they are digital or theatrical. Calleja's description is comprehensive and elucidates the history of "immersion" in new game studies as well as broader cultural studies, but he does not address the role of the social in the immersive process. Massively multiplayer role-playing games such as *World of Warcraft* rely heavily on their social structures to engage players, to help them form an attachment to the game, and to help them succeed in the game. *WoW* makes use of both absorption immersion and immersion through transportation; the social aspect of the game absorbs the attention of the player, but it also transports that player to a space--free of sensory input--that over time feels like a conversation in a crowded room. When combined with the transporting power of the sensory of richness of the virtual-active space (the space in which a player maneuvers their avatar), I would argue that the social becomes just as important a part of the

experience as the complex soundscape, beautiful (if dated) game art, or the player's naturalization of game mechanics (a topic to which I'll return shortly).

Machon, on the other hand, neglects to recognize the performative nature of video game play in MMO spaces. While she summarizes Calleja's history of the term admirably, Machon's own definition of theatrical immersion emphasizes the ability to physically interact with the actors in a performance space. I have argued previously that *WoW,* as one of the largest intentional communities in the world, is therefore one of the largest performance communities in the world.[29] As the game requires that players embody avatars and perform together to become a part of an extensive, scripted narrative, I would argue that *WoW* is itself a digital form of immersive theatre. In fact, I would argue that it is embodiment that makes both immersion and performance possible in this particular digital space.

Identity

Though MMOs in their current form are a fairly new phenomenon with the mid and late 1990s serving as the initial boom era of commercial MMORPGs that take place in a three dimensional graphical space. However, scholarship on cooperative and communal online gaming has examined the modern MMO's precursors--namely table-top role playing games such as *Dungeons and Dragons* and online, text-based Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs)--with new media theorists tracing the trajectory of both the formation of digital identities and virtual interaction in these early spaces. Through these analyses,

[29] *World of Warcraft* is, in fact, the second largest immersive digital community in the world. The largest is Linden Labs' *Second Life*, which is neither MMO nor game.

we can follow the evolution of the MMO as a ludic form and the early, optimistic thoughts on identity. Media scholars have attempted to critically engage with virtual identity since the first easily-accessed Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs) appeared in cyberspace in the mid 1980s. Technology scholars Sherry Turkle and Allucquère Roseanne Stone first grappled with issues of identity and multiple personality in text-based chat rooms and online role-playing environments. They laid the foundation for what would become discussions of identity and the avatar in *Life on the Screen* (Turkle) and *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age* (Stone) by discussing the second self as a digital creation. Stone's ethnographic study of role-play in a space not designated for such chicanery assumes that an inner identity--the "real" or core self (or selves) that lives and interacts in the real world—fails to map across ludic digital spaces (80). Her work moves away from the Cartesian notion of the centralized and "real" self, and the performative nature of online worlds serves as an example of the possibility of embodying multiple selves. As I will later explain, however, my performances of identity is linked to the politics that shape my real world self; no matter how completely I play at being an Other/another person online, my actions in that space will at least partially reflect the face I present to the physical world. Stone alludes to cyberspace as a public theatre, a performance in which we are all both actors and audience simultaneously. She suggests that the ludic nature of virtual spaces allows for the redefinition of the embodied individual, allowing for the "creation of an identity so fluid and multiple that it strains the limits of the notion" (12).

Turkle, on the other hand, asserted that a sense of self in the virtual realm is plural rather than fixed, thus allowing for "greater capacity for acknowledging diversity. It makes it easier to accept the array of our (and others') inconsistent personae" (261). Both scholars seem to have drawn a line between the virtual and the physical self (though aspects of one often seep into the others). Both Stone and Turkle posited that the purity of the "real self" grounds the ludic proliferation of virtual selves. However, we should note that both Turkle and Stone worked with text-based, non-digitally corporeal forms of virtual identity.

There has been considerable pushback against Turkle's work in particular and much expansion upon Stone's early hopes for the evolution of virtual identity as a form of freedom from social strictures. With the benefit of hindsight and the growth of interactive cyber spaces, both Lisa Nakamura and Slavoj Žižek have moved toward a less utopic view of the identity building process. Nakamura has expressed doubt that "regulatory and oppressive social norms such as racism and sexism" are linked to users' off-screen identities alone, particularly as online identities are still *typed*, as in "mired in oppressive roles even if the body has been left behind or bracketed" (Nakamura, *Cybertypes* 4). Racism and sexism are even less escapable in *WoW* as the avatarial bodies of the game's characters are not created through user-generated text as they were in the early, text-based multi-user dungeons that serve as the sites for much of this foundational scholarship. Rather, *WoW*'s avatars are visualized through a sophisticated graphics engine; while the player may configure and customize these bodies, they are first and foremost visual representations whose parameters the game's designers (not the players)

dictate. These bodies are identifiably male and female, white and Othered, and therefore mired with the complicated gender and race biases of the real world from the moment of character creation. These biases seem to feed into Žižek's concerns that the progressive 'externalization' of identity endangers our "most elementary perception of 'our own body' as it is related to its environs; it cripples our standard phenomenological attitude towards the body of another person [...] and conceive the surface as directly expressing the 'soul'" (134). If both the game's developers and the players-as-character-creators operate with a real-world understanding of gender and race politics from the beginning of the game, the character development process--from level progression to the creation of a distinct virtual identity--will shape itself around those ideas. A player whose understanding of blackness includes rap and ratchet culture will likely read the game's Orc population through the lens of contemporary US black hip-hop culture. The game's twerking, hammer dancing Orcish bodies reinforce this conclusion rather than creating a possibility for alternate interpretation. I argue, then that avatarial appearance plays a foundational role in guiding a player's identity formation process.

It is James Gee who argues for three recognizable identities in the virtual role-playing game (v-RPG) in his book *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy*. He defines these as **virtual identity**, or the identity of the avatar in the gameworld. The second is the **real-world identity**--also or non-virtual identity (Waggoner 1)--or the identity of the player who is sitting at the computer. We should note here that Gee acknowledges that real-world identity is not stable or finite, but fluid and a response to stimuli. The third form is **projective identity (projective stance** in

elsewhere**)**, or a merging of the motivations and desires of the physical and avatarial selves; more specifically, this form of identity allows players to incorporate their own beliefs, ideologies, and moral codes into their developing digital character. However, it also imagines physical world identity as an origin point and therefore dominant rather than a two-way process; the flow of identity goes both ways, from the real to the virtual and from the virtual to the real.

For example, *WoW* relies very heavily on activities such as killing, torture, and otherwise ethically questionable acts as a method of generating player "experience points"--the currency with which a player levels their character. Often, the game does not allow a player a choice in whether or not to complete a morally questionable quest (which is often not framed as morally questionable within the game's narrative); frequently a player must complete the quest in order to gain access to the next in a chain of events. However, this does not mean that the action won't raise a player's moral red flags. There are, in fact, numerous posts in the Blizzard forums, on Metafilter, and on Reddit that question the presence torture or genocide in the game. There are players who will flatly refuse to complete such missions, choosing instead to handicap their character by finding other methods of leveling.

Waggoner expands on Gee's projective self by identifying it as a form of liminality in which the player must straddle reality and virtuality. He explains that while projective selfhood leaves the physical world behind, it retains a connection to reality's assumptions of what constitutes a believable experience (15). Fantasy in a virtual space can only extend so far; the game world must strive to maintain verisimilitude by using

principles that reflect our experiences of the real world. New media theorist Bob Rehak explains:

> We create avatars to leave our bodies behind, yet take the body with us in the form of codes and assumptions about what does and does not constitute a legitimate interface with reality--virtual or otherwise. [...] The worlds we create -- and the avatarial bodies through which we experience them--seem destined to mirror not our wholeness, but our lack of it (123-24).

The game world, then, can only deviate from the real world so much before players immersed in the space feel a disconnect between their avatar's actions and what their real identity might do in the real world. While neither Rehak nor Waggoner address the idea, I believe this verisimilitude works in two ways: overly fantastic immersive spaces must strive to walk the line between a deviation from reality and overuse of fantasy. Breaking too many of the rules that define reality (abandoning social structures, creating entirely amoral environments, suspending the rules of physics to an extreme degree) creates a space that fails to engage the player. In fact, this may be an answer to Gordon Calleja's question of the proliferation of the word "immersive" as a selling point in videogame ad-copy--players do not want to be jolted out of their game experience (25). On the other hand, I believe that despite the number of increasingly violent videogames released on the market, we have yet to see videogames that show violence in either a non-hyperbolized or non-sanitized form. Games such as the *Grand Theft Auto* series, *Thrill Kill,* or the *Postal* series--while almost fetishistically violent--portray bloodshed and death in a form that is more Quentin Tarantinoesque than real and, more often than not,

injected with a macabre humor.[30] The virtual world must straddle the line between the real and the fantastic in order to create a world that resembles the fantasies familiar from other forms of media.

Gee insists that liminality in this sense is crucial to identity formation that occurs in virtual role-play. A player's real world identity has to merge with the goals and motivations of their character in order for that character to be believable within the scope of the constructed virtual space. This liminal space resembles the process of an actor preparing to immerse him/herself in a performance, taking only what is necessary from reality to convert the self into his/her given role. The projective stance provides the necessary distance between the "real" self and the virtual so that the player can engage with the digital world without daily nuisances, personal conflicts, or moral hang-ups of the real impeding what is ostensibly make-believe fun. The portal to this liminal space of "getting into character" is a literal, if digital, one. The digital portal (or game sign-in page) serves as the dressing room for the player-as-performer. It is a space where they can look at their character as though in a mirror and begin to imagine themselves as the mind behind the operations of that body.[31]

James Gee's use of the term identity in *What Video Games Have to Teach Us About Learning and Literacy* closely mirrors his discussion of embodiment in "Video Games and Embodiment", a conflation that is problematic as it deemphasizes the

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[30] Quentin Tarantino's films, while extremely violent, are known for their hyperbolized violence and bloodshed. The yellow track suited fight scene from *Kill Bill Part 1* may be the most immediately recognizable example of his style.

[31] Generally, players do not face their character. While in motion or combat, the player follows in a camera position that is behind and above their character's body, providing a full-body yet third-person view of the avatar.

importance of the political nature of identity; specifically the roles that race, gender, class, age, etc. play in the formation of a self, whether that self be in the real world or online. In the former he states that projective identity is the "interface between one's real-world identities and virtual identity" --a definition that matches his "projective stance" in the latter. While Gee's definition of projective selfhood has become one of the cornerstones of later work on digital identity (Waggoner), I found his indistinct use of the terms limiting when applied to my research site. Gee states quite specifically that, "there are, of course, other terms in circulation for what I am calling 'identity' (e.g., the term 'subjectivity') and 'core identity' (e.g., some people reserve the term 'identity' for 'core identity'). I don't think it is important what terms we use.[...]" (Gee, Identity as an Analytic Lens 100). While for Gee, terms such as identity, selfhood, or subjectivity are mere analytical tools for studying the larger issues of literacy and learning, I believe that the individual terms require more clarification when applied to MMOs. My definition of identity moves beyond the "kind of person" one is recognized as being at any place and time (or that individual identity is stable) to encompass the influence of political identifiers on the self (i.e.: race, gender, class, and education). I posit that, through the processes of immersion and embodiment, a player forms a shifting identity that is both politically rich and naturalized within the digital space and that is influenced by their own political identity.

Naturally, the "kind of person" a player performs online is a complex question--complicated by the coalescence of several seemingly separate modes of online interaction. The person that I am as I inhabit my avatar, Aktobe, is one is heroic, ruthless,

and the member of a marginalized group of people living in a desolate wasteland. In reality, however, I am the privileged, highly educated woman from a solidly middle-class, racially-complex-yet-white-privileged background trying to balance my work life, social life, and gaming life. In the social space that exists between these two disparate identities, aspects from both modes seep into my performance of selfhood in the social realm of the games. The "kind of person" I am while interacting with fellow players online cannot exist without the background of the game's narrative informing my digital decisions, nor can it exist without the political aspects of my real-world identity that define who I am and how I view the world.

My intervention into Gee's discussion of identity/embodiment is to redefine the two terms independent of one another. I have no quarrel with Gee's theorization of **real, virtual, and projective identities**, and in fact find them particularly useful for discussing the process of expressing selfhood in virtual worlds scholarship. However, I would like to politically charge the theorization of these three identities, factoring in the roles of race, gender, etc. in the formation of both the ideologies of the various selves as they are paramount to a discussion of the formation of self in the racially charged environment of *WoW*. I posit that it is impossible to remove a discussion of experience in *World of Warcraft* from a discussion identity politics, as the narrative premise of the game is almost entirely founded on a heavily coded fantasy portrayal of real world racial conflicts. The presence of a race war, of stereotypically raced bodies, and interactions between players whose political identities have already formed in the real world demand that these factors be a central part of any discussion of identity online.

Embodiment

"Embodiment" is another term that has a long and storied history in both media studies and performance scholarship. Etymologically speaking, "embody"--literally "in the/a body" has been in use since the mid 16th century and referred to a soul/spirit invested with physical form. That particular use of the term has never been contested, though scholarly theorization of the embodiment process has debated the nuances of the relationship between mind and body from the work of Descartes and (later) Lacan's work to its analysis in new media circles. One of the many OED entries on the term defines embodiment as causing "to become part of a body; to unite in one body."

Media theorist Maggie Hansen has done the work of historicizing the concept of embodiment from Descartes onward, allowing us to follow the shifting nuances of the definition over time. I have briefly summarized her thoughts, as the shifting understanding of embodiment plays a central role of my use of the term in reference to avatarial embodiment, habitus, and racial empathy. Hansen explains that Cartesian thought posits that the body is a sum of simultaneously sensed parts, therefore the limits of the body are the limits of one's senses. "Cogito ergo sum" connects the intangible idea of self to the tangible idea of the body. Lacan complicates this idea with his theorization of the mirror stage in child psychological development; Lacan's theory asserts that man senses his body as an accumulation of pieces sensed simultaneously and is only understood as whole when viewed from a distance; embodiment is only achieved with assistance from "an 'other' seemingly detached object" (the mirror). Philosopher Marshall

McLuhan rethinks both of these theories by stating that technology serves to extend the boundaries of the body's senses, creating the potential for further alienation from the body itself. New technologies (such as immersive media) become a means of extending our senses beyond our physical bodies, but create the risk for us to lose our grounding with reality. It is not until Maurice Merleau-Ponty that we begin to see a discussion of technologies as "instruments [that] have become detachable organs" that do not displace the self (uchicago.edu). By extension, we can posit that the virtual avatarial bodies in *WoW* are technological tools that serve to extend our selves into a digital environment rich with sensory experience and which inspire an affective response to virtual stimuli. The avatar-as-prosthesis, however, remains a somewhat reductive definition of the experience of embodying a digital avatar.

In his virtual anthropological study *Coming of Age in Second Life*, Tom Boellstorff posits that the term "embodied" emerged as a part of virtuality studies to challenge the then-popular presumption of cognition as disembodied--an adherence to the Cartesian logic that had informed 19th century anthropology rather than the autoethnographic work of most contemporary scholarship (134). Boellstorff claims that virtual embodiment has a "corporeal immediacy that could not be reduced to a simulation of actual-world embodiment" as changes to avatars were immediate and complete. Boellstorff's site, however, is *Second Life*--a space whose caché rests almost entirely on the malleability of both the space and its inhabitants. As the characters within *WoW* are set at the point of creation and largely unalterable once the player embodies the avatar and takes it into the virtual space for the first time, and as only developers can alter the

design of the game environment, I would argue that players create avatars that they hope to grow into; I strove to create a character that matched my understanding of the character's place within the culture of the game's lore.[32]

Boellstorff goes on to state that assuming that actual-world embodiment is the only human experience of the phenomenon assumes a romanticized view of unmediated interactions between humans, and that the physical is one part of an experience that encompasses social and cultural embodiment as well (135). Embodiment, then, resembles identity, though it is not a perfectly matched synonym. Rather, the embodied avatar is the melding of the virtual body with a player's identity into a singular being--a definite return to the standard OED definition of the term. I choose to define embodiment as a player's knowledge of the movement and action of the avatarial body in both the virtual and physical realms. Rather than a sensory experience alone--for, after all, the only senses the virtual world can physically engage are sight and sound--embodiment also encompasses a player's emotional connection to the avatar itself and to a feeling of absolute control over that avatar's movements and actions. This latter experience is known as "microcontrol" amongst new media theorists.

Gee briefly describes the concept of "microcontrol" as a way for the player to feel a physical affinity with her avatar (Clark 1997, Gee 2005b). The term microcontrol refers to the feeling that one's body extends as far as the space over which they have control--whether that be to the end of a cane or to the immediate virtual environment surrounding

[32] Note that the *Wrath of the Lich King* expansion introduced a barbershop into the game so that players dissatisfied with their avatar's image could make limited alterations to hairstyle, facial hair, and horns. Tauren later received the ability to change skin tone. (wowwiki.com/barbershop)

an avatar. Microcontrol gives players the feeling that their bodies have extended into space, and more importantly solidifies the connection between the physicality of the player and the immediacy of avatarial action. The lack of friction between a keystroke and a spell cast or axe swung serves as one of many techniques of immersing the player into the digital environment.[33] The experience of microcontrol, however, seems to mirror in many ways Merleau-Ponty's description of technologies as a form of digital tool with which we extend our consciousness into the virtual space.

Control and Player Habitus

In avatar control games, players have an embodied presence in the game world that has a front, back, left, and right. Much as in the real world, there is an orientation of a body in space with a sense of a future ahead and a past lying behind. This presence can be more loosely organized in a virtual environment than in the actual world, since in some cases players can opt to view the world in the first person or to zoom out to a third person perspective. Nevertheless, the avatar still has an orientation to the world around her through which the player's agency is channeled. When a player plots a route through a geographical expanse and then navigates it, it is more likely that she will feel a sense of habitation within the game environment. There is the added satisfaction of having expended effort to reach a particular destination (Calleja 75).

Both the naturalization of movement and the naturalization of social practices on the online space are central components of the immersive experience of participating in

[33] Excessive delays between key strokes and on-screen action, or "lagging", break the near-seamless merging of player and avatar and rip the player from his or her immersive state.

an MMO. In my experience, movement, speech, and response become a part of a naturalized state of being while playing the game. After just a few weeks of play, I had learned my way around the cities of *World of Warcraft* so well that it was like navigating my childhood neighborhood. Likewise, I naturalized the keystrokes and mouse movements needed to perform almost any allowable action in the game, a process that Maurice Merleau-Ponty called the development of "motor intentionality", or the conscious development of movement that relies on already acquired skills from the social realm applied to a new context (Noland 17). I also absorbed and employed the vernacular speech of the world, learning the textual shorthand that would gain me acceptance in established player groups and allow me to navigate the social space more deftly. I even brought my understanding of physical space limitations to the game, often observing a polite one-foot distance from other players in tightly packed areas. These naturalized actions and modes of speech are a form of digital *habitus* that meld physical world understandings of space with new digital habits. I define *habitus* along the lines of Pierre Bourdieu as repeated activities that, once learned, become so engrained that the original purpose becomes forgotten and the behavior becomes a part of social culture (Bourdieu 57). For example, the players master not only the movements of the game, but learn to accept the expectations of their character when exploring the virtual environment. *WoW* is incredibly adept at retraining the player's already hardwired understanding of the world-at-large. One prominent way that the game trains a player is by naturalizing an "us versus them" mentality for the player. From the beginning of the game, the game trains the player to understand the world around them as hostile. The vast majority of the

world's creatures will attempt to kill a player if s/he passes too closely. The landscape is rugged and can harm the player if s/he falls off a cliff or fails to jump a ravine. Most importantly, the races of the opposite faction are the player's natural enemy. Players learn to naturalize a combative and violent attitude toward the word at large and toward enemy faction players in particular. This attitude becomes so ingrained that after only a few days of playing the game I did not hesitate to attack another player in a neutral environment. I did not try to speak to the player (impossible within the game's parameters) or avoid them--I simply cast a spell and struck them down without questioning. Afterward, I moved on without a second thought (I even felt a bit proud, despite the fact that the character was several levels below me).Players learn to respond to any new encounter with an attack or attempt to kill; the player learns to accept violence of many types, to disregard racial markers (or at least to not comment upon them), and to embrace the presence of a perpetual enemy with whom there can be no peace. Through these first forays into the digital play and social spaces, players are also developing and employing new habits as well as learning the ideology and sensibilities that shape the gameworld.

The pre-scripted narrative and leveling process are not the only parts of the game that shape habitus. Social instruction is as much a part of the world as directed instruction from in-game tutorials. The social group of the guild provides a mode of interaction--generally the chat room or a voice chat service--that teaches players to hate the players of the Alliance without ever examining the reasons for such conflict. The social structure also encourages the player to strive for constant improvement, teaching many players to approach the game as a form of work that requires constant effort. Players form the habits

of completing daily quests for money, running daily dungeons for better gear, and researching their roles both in the family of the guild and in the larger game world as a whole.

Habit formation, as defined by anthropologist Gregory Bateson, is the "sinking of knowledge down to less conscious and more archaic levels.[...] Habit, therefore, is a major economy of conscious thought" (141-42). He expands on this to explain that these habits must remain modifiable for any given situation. This sinking, however, comes at a cost--that of inaccessibility. "It becomes difficult for the organism to examine the matrix out of which his conscious conclusions sprung" (142). It is important to note that *WoW* trains its players to engage in practices that are not generally considered acceptable in physical world society. For example, the game trains the player to respond to nearly every new encounter with immediate violence. Any chance meeting with a stray beast, enemy character, or harmless critter becomes an opportunity to subdue, maim, or (usually) kill lest these creatures attack and harm the player first. While the game designers imposed limits on this behavior--a player cannot, for example, attempt to attack a commanding officer, a friendly player, or the leader of his/her tribe--the vast majority of player/environment interaction occurs through direct attack. Likewise, the game trains the player to identify friends and enemies through racial profiling. While training itself is immediately recognizable as such within the game--the first 20 levels include an extensive pop-up guided tutorial that teach new players how to open dialogue panels or fire weapons--the nature of *what* is being trained is much more subtle. Players may learn that a red nametag above a player or beast's head marks that person or creature as open to

combat, but they don't necessarily note the fact that the game teaches them to attack and attack alone--there is no possibility for rational negotiations of peace. So while the game teaches the player how to embody their character and what physical (button pushing) habits must be acquired, it also instills within them some of the components that help comprise his/her virtual identity. Players therefore focus more on game mechanics than game rationale and never learn to question their actions online--an omission that bleeds into their interactions with other players in the social realm.

Habitus is one of the mechanisms that allows for ideas to seep from one realm into another along the interaction continuum, but it is by no means the only vehicle for the passage of ideology from the virtual realm into the real (or vice versa). The social space serves as a doorway between the two spaces, allowing for the identity of the character and the identity of the player to mingle. The following vignette explains the character creation process and its role as a vehicle for player identity. continuum.

Character Creation

When I began playing *WoW* in the summer of 2005, I had little knowledge of racial tensions that informed the lore of the game. To be fair, I had little understanding of critical race theory at all, as I had only glossed over the subject in college and had not yet started graduate courses. As a result, it did not occur to me to apply critical race theory to the newest game on the market; for the most part, I did not notice the influence of real-world race in the game. In the beginning, I understood only that there were two factions, the Horde and Alliance, and that I would play Horde because the real-life friends with

whom I would be playing did not like playing with "the 12 year-olds" that formed the Alliance. I did not learn until much later that the Alliance and Horde are comprised of nearly identical player populations. Upon logging in and reaching the character creation screen, My past experience of gaming had presented me with the option to create buxom, idealized female humans; I found myself disappointed that there were (at this time) no Horde races that met my standards of beauty. We should note that my standards of beauty in 2005 were predictable: I embraced the ideal composition of a tall, sylph-like woman with improbably large breasts for her BMI, pale skin, pale eyes and dark hair--an unattainable beauty that my real-life body could never be in reality without considerable augmentation. American media with its white, middle-class male gaze created my understanding of acceptable beauty. While my real-world body fell short of the paragons that I saw on TV, my avatar's body didn't even come within striking distance of passable. She was short, overly muscular, bald, tusked and *green.* However, the friend who initially encouraged me to join the game derided my disappointment: "The Horde is awesome!" she said. "The Alliance is full of 12 year-olds because they insist on playing the pretty people. That's why I play Horde--we can see past that and just play the game." And so, rather than bemoaning my fate as an unattractive Orc, I set out to create the prettiest Orc possible from the assemblage of body parts available to me on the character creation screen. (But I never stopped longing for an attractive, human avatar.)

I did not recognize at that time that making a pretty Orc meant making a character with the whitest features I could find. I substituted turquoise skin for my warlock, eschewing the original greens the system assigned me, as I found the bluer tone more

acceptable. Aktobe's body was athletic and visibly ripped; she seemed almost stocky compared to her tall, lithe Human counterparts, but I had no control over her body type. With the available hairstyles restricted to hideous mohawks and pigtails, I opted for a shaved head with a long braid down the back, pleased that my Orc had something of a Sinead O'Conner look from the front. Of the available faces, I chose the youngest looking face-- a wide-eyed and heavily pierced combination that never quite made sense together. My character's childlike face stared forward with little expression (Fig.3.1), appearing either vapid or confused depending on the position of her eyebrows. As time passed, I came to regret my choice of face. My character, though dark and powerful in combat, appeared strangely passive and peaceful even when casting the deadliest of spells. As the game's narrative carried me through the trials and tribulations of Azeroth, I became acquainted with the plight of the Orcs and their desire to regain their long-lost honor through heroic (if often incredibly violent) acts. I began to take pride in Aktobe's apparent toughness and ability to hold her own in battle. My smooth-faced, nearly-pretty Orc seemed more and more out of step with grunting, hacking, scurrying tasks that carried her from the barren wasteland of her home in Durotar to the civilized human lands of the Humans in Stormwind and back again. It was only by acquiring pointed, ferocious looking armor that I could make myself feel that Aktobe truly belonged in the body I had created for her (Fig. 3.2).

Figure 3.1: Aktobe's childlike face

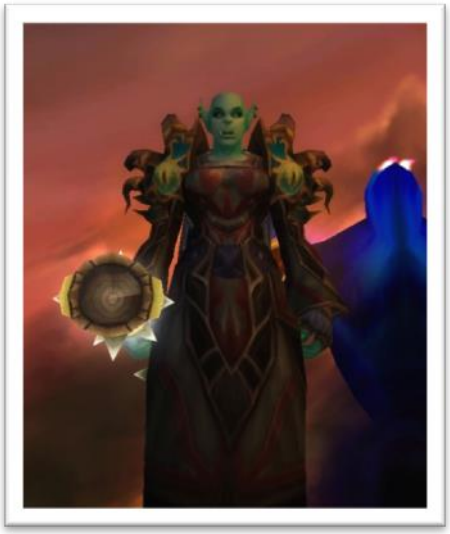

Figure 3.2: Aktobe in rare (powerful) level 80 armor with her minion, Gotkaz

It took little over three years--most of which was spent studying race and gender politics in graduate courses--for me to realize that the game's developers had not coded my vapid Orc as a white body and that I was trying to force her into a role she could never occupy. The evidence for this realization mounted daily: I learned how to use the in

game "emote" system--a simple series of commands that allow you to make a character /dance, /clap, /cheer, /fart, etc.--and discovered that my Orc moved like a rapper's backup dancer.[34] I noticed that her body was the most athletic of the humanoid forms in the game (the exception to this rule is the body of the Tauren, which is an upright cow). I realized that the governing structure of her race group was tribal, not feudal. And I noted that she lived in a hut. As I learned the lore of the Horde, I discovered that the Orcs were former slaves who had risen up against their masters to reclaim their freedom, and that their clan is composed of many smaller war bands ("Orcs"). The entire context surrounding my character coded her as African-American or African (the designers pulled from both areas). In short, I realized that I was embodying a race that I had not experienced in the real world--a fact that both titillated and confused.

Embodying a character that is not of the user's race in a virtual space is an act that media theorist Lisa Nakamura termed "racial tourism". She describes racial tourism as the act of inhabiting a digital body of an Other without the social weight or consequence of having to live in that body in reality (Cybertypes 47). Nakamura's choice of the concept of tourism, however, adds a layer to the act of inhabiting an Other; as tourists in the digital space, players experience a different temporality—one in which achievement is sped up, in which community can form in the space of hours, and where exploration costs little in terms of time and expense. Tourism, in the traditional and the digital sense, implies a sense of freedom and pleasure that is often at odds with my own readings of racial embodiment online. Nakamura's description, describes an act that embraces the

[34] Aktobe's dance is a direct imitation of the female dancers in rapper Juvenile's "Back That Azz Up" music video (1998).

experience of embodying a stereotypically "ethnic" and Othered body and more often than not bypasses any critical engagement with either the differences between races or the subcultures within an individual construct of race. Rather, avatars are carefully constructed, homogenized representative stereotypes of various world races that draw from popular media, cultural tradition, and Western myth to create intertextual pastiches of both White and Othered bodies. My experience of Aktobe might be construed as racial tourism, but only from the point at which I *recognized* that I was embodying an Other. It was only once I began to learn the story of the Orcs that I began to empathize with their plight and want to become a true hero of the Horde. The act of adopting the goals and motivations of my avatar eased me into the embodiment of my character; I felt empathy for her desires and therefore made them my own.

Nakamura addresses the issue that digital bodies cannot be untethered from their social and cultural biases toward race, gender, or culture. Players enter the digital space with long-held, real-world biases intact and read those understandings onto the narrative world and the players that surround them. This argument is important on two levels: On the first, more superficial level we can understand that players read in-game characters as raced because we are already familiar with those codes from our experiences with real world media. We can read Orcs as black because I recognize a dance or associate (however incorrectly) African origins with the primitivism of the Orc's home city architecture. There is little room within the game to transgress or redefine these codes. However, there is a second level that we must consider: The real-world biases that players bring into the game have the ability to cross from the real into the virtual space

via the social realm of the game. Racialized language and slurs are as much a part of the social space as discussions of game strategy, and as the social space serves as a kind of waypoint between the real and the virtual, it is just as easy as the naturalized goals and mores of the virtual character to cross into the social as well. By inhabiting multiple realms at once, players are likely to absorb and take away some of the less obvious racial pedagogies within the game--i.e.: the us vs. them mentality, the dark as evil and light as good construct, and the idea of whiteness as a base from which all other races evolve (a lack of whiteness as equivalent to a lack of humanness). Embodying a *WoW* character is a process that necessarily includes real-world understandings of identity, racial and otherwise.

Despite inhabiting the body of a non-white character, the game actually reversed the polarity of its own narrative of racial disparity. As a white-privileged woman inhabiting a body coded as African-American, I internalized the plight of my character--that of a formerly enslaved race--and transferred my empathy with her community's struggles to the readily available real-world binaries that served as the model for the game's narrative to begin with. I imagined the Orcs akin to the former slaves of the American South, attempting to make a new life despite Jim Crow laws and abject hatred from the white community. This projection inspired my dedication to the Horde and hatred for the Alliance, most particularly the (very white) Humans and their lives of comparative privilege. I internalized this dedication by identifying all enemy faction characters as "fucking twelve year-olds with Mommy's credit card." (I am admittedly not proud of this fact.) My immediate reaction was to read privilege and class, and therefore

race, onto my in-game "enemies", effectively infantilizing and dismissing their skills and agency as full game participants. We should note here that the only informal census of *WoW* has shown that there is negligible difference between age demographics of the two factions (Yee 2005). Unfortunately, there is no comprehensive data on player race or sex available at this date.

This internalization of game narrative, however, placed me in the precarious position of attempting to empathize with an Other while reinforcing dominant discourses on race, slavery, and American history; I created a fantasy, and no matter how historically informed, the imagined sufferings of my character could be nothing other than a proxy to the actuality of those events. By attempting to read historical narratives onto a fantasy body, I have actually erased the bodies with which I am attempting to empathize. Put more deliberately:

> The effort to counteract the commonplace callousness to black suffering requires that the white body be positioned in the place of the black body in order to make this suffering visible and intelligible. Yet if this violence can become palpable and indignation can be fully aroused only through masochistic fantasy, then it becomes clear that empathy is double-edged, for in making the other's suffering one's own, this suffering is occluded by the other's obliteration. (Hartman 19)

By placing myself in the Othered body, I am not only playing the racial tourist (Nakamura), but also obscuring and perverting the plight and suffering of the Othered bodies that inspired the fantasy narrative to begin with. It became easy to ignore the historical plight of Black bodies in reality when presented with an engaging and

interactive history in the game and to read myself into a narrative of oppression and hardship, rather than to acknowledge the very real histories that informed my character's background. This privileged activity serves to reinforce *WoW* as a space of whiteness.

In Chapter 2, I reference the fact that *World of Warcraft* exists as a space of whiteness, both marked and marketed as a space for young(ish) men of some privilege. As a privileged, educated woman, I felt from the beginning that I entered this space as a member of a minority. While unofficial census data would later prove that approximately 3 of every 10 players is a female, I felt that I was out of place in a traditionally masculine space. It became all too easy to begin imagining myself as the only woman, the only person of mixed-heritage (albeit white privileged), the only mature player, the only *informed* player (as concerns race theory). I soon began to assume that every other player I encountered was young (teen or college aged), white, middle class, unenlightened, and male until a vocal or textual introduction proved otherwise. I continued to invest in this belief throughout the seven years of my time as an active player despite the objective knowledge that the real-life identities of my fellow players were as diverse as my own. The guild with which I spent the most time during my tenure (approx. 4 years of play) was a mixed group of blue collar, third shift workers, stay-at-home mothers, college students, and IT workers. Though primarily white or white-privileged, some of the most prominent and active members of the guild were Chinese-Canadian, African-American, Korean-American, and South American. I discovered the nationalities and cultural heritage of these players through two means: through small vocal tells and inadvertent hints in VOIP conversations (a slight accent, a foreign language in the background, a

time-zone difference) and through my own incessant curiosity (I asked). While I never consciously treated these players differently, my conversations with them were generally held in a public chat space. On occasion, my guild mates' attitudes toward fellow players shifted. Generally this shift was jocular in nature. Players might teasingly use a mild racial slur in order to head off conflict or choose to condescend in a way that they had not before. In particular, I noticed that women were treated as less-informed gamers and offered tutorials from male guild leaders. I benefited from several of these offers in my early days in the guild, but found the offers grated after a few weeks time as they always followed an assumption of my status as a lesser-gamer (n00b, or newbie). My experience of receiving less respect after the other players discovered my gender was frustrating.

Matters intensified after the introduction of a picture thread into our guild forum page. Many players expressed their shock when reality upset their assumptions about my identity, and thus had to openly negotiate the fluidity of identity politics online. Racial identity and performance in *WoW* isn't something that can be read off the player's avatarial choices, the visual or sonic features of a player, how other players code the individual, or a player's personal identity politics alone, but rather a blending of each of these factors. Identity performance, then, is not stable but rather a mixture of assertion, performance, and audience reception.

As I explained in Chapter 1, I have enjoyed white privilege all my life though I spent the majority of my youth understanding myself to be a mixed-race individual. I do not have regularly "white" features (whatever those may be), but I do share the physical features of the more "obviously" Japanese-American or Lebanese-Americans who are

read as Other. Guild mates informed me that they could not guess at my heritage after viewing the photo and were shocked to find that I am of partially non-European descent. While I don't fit comfortably into any particular cultural-physical stereotype (I have neither the visual or sonic qualities that code as a part of a multicultural background), my claiming of a mixed racial politics in the picture thread of the online guild forum caused my guild mates to read race onto somewhat unmarked features (pale skin, dark hair, almond-ish eyes, round face and prominent cheekbones). The result was an odd mix of flirtatious revulsion and confusion; many of the players did not know what to make of me, but a few suddenly associated my heritage with an exotic Otherness and imbued me with race-based powers that I do not have. One player in particular, Frakture, assumed that my heritage as a part-Asian woman indicated that he should feel free to proposition me via private chat--an act that effectively severed a two-year online friendship. Another effect of this shift is that I suddenly became an authority in the use of racial slurs; requests to not use the more offensive language of militaristic racial generalization were suddenly taken more seriously than they had been in the past, though this was by no means universal. Shortly after revealing my background, I asked a fellow guild mate, JoetheToe to refrain from using the term "sand nigger" to refer to those from Arab countries. I didn't have to explain why the word was offensive; Joe knew he was in the wrong. His immediate response was to say, "Sorry Aktobe. You know I didn't mean you, right? It's just a word we used a lot in the Army." While Joe was quick to apologize for the use of the term in my presence, he did justify its use by linking it to his military

service--an act that I believe he thought should grant him a free pass to use the dehumanizing language of the US military in the battle context of *World of Warcraft*.

The social space of the guild website served to do what guild chat alone could not: it made my guild mates recognize me as a complete human being with a recognizable real-world identity. Guild mates gained insight into the decisions I made in-game and the things I said and I was (mostly) treated with more respect because of my revelations.[35] However, when roaming the game world at large players are not connected to one another via a network like the guild (with the advantage of a guild website). Players are anonymous identities housed within raced avatarial bodies; it becomes all too easy to read Otherness of one type or another onto those figures and to then associate those bodies with already ingrained real-world biases. For example, after returning from a losing battle against a group of Alliance characters, guild mate Snozzberry announced that he hated fighting against "those fucking pussy Alliance" because they're all "12 year olds with mommys [sic] credit card". While these were not racial slurs, they were methods of feminizing and infantilizing the enemy--both methods that have been applied to minority groups to justify the "superiority" of the majority. Interestingly, Alliance player DevilCake indicated that her experiences of the generalizations from the opposite side of the faction lines were that Horde characters were universally "assholes, but the Alliance is a beacon of intelligence and tolerance." Again, these assumptions are not necessarily raced, but they do indicate a collective understanding as the Othered

[35] There are several specific events that contest this, which I address in the introduction to this project and will address in the next chapter.

characters of the Horde as somehow less mature and less civilized than those of the Alliance.

There is, of course, no one to one correlation between player perceptions of enemy faction members and player behavior in the real world. However, the factions of the Horde and the Alliance are so divided that players on each side often begin to incorporate the ideologies of the faction into their real-world identities. Many of the players that I interviewed expressed a fierce loyalty toward their chosen faction and actively vilify not only the enemy faction but the player who chooses to join it. Evidence for this empathy can be found in the proliferation of Horde and Alliance stickers in players' vehicle windows in the real world. These stickers not only proudly proclaim their affiliation to fellow players on the freeway (a message hidden in plain sight from non-gaming motorists), but serves as a warning to opposite faction players they may encounter. While humorous from an anecdotal point of view, these proclamations of loyalty indicate a deep-seated desire to claim the honors and achievements of the online character as one's own; it does not seem like a stretch to believe that some of the racial ideologies that are naturalized during the gaming process might become a part of the player's real-world identity as well.

Conclusions

Scholars have acknowledged the importance of embodiment and identity in the virtual space almost from the earliest introduction of online social spaces, but too often the terms have been glossed over or, more often, the importance of one has been

emphasized over the other. Both terms have a place of prominence in my work because each plays an important role in how a player interacts with and experiences the game. Embodiment addresses the sensory experience of the digital space, a facet of the gaming experience that immerses the player into the game world and allows them to feel that their decisions and movements in that space are justifiable and naturalized. Identity addresses the player's formation and performance of a self that is raced, gendered, and classed in the game's social space. The collision of these two facets of the game experience in the social realm of the game account for the slippage of ideologies from the virtual to the real and back again. I assert that it is the player's constantly shifting positionality of inhabiting both a social and a narrative/role-playing space simultaneously that allows these ideologies to flow between the realms undetected.

As *World of Warcraft* exists within a fantasy world that relies on outmoded, 19th century understandings of race and as the world itself is coded as white, male, and heteronormative, the slippage of narrative ideologies into the social space of the guild is problematic. It is too easy for the conflicted and confrontational mentality of the battle-worn "hero" to become the antagonistic and judgmental attitude of the player in the social space, and it is players whose identities do not conform to the white, male, heteronormative setting of the game who shoulder the burden of players' threatening language and behavior. These effects, however, are subtle. Too often both players and outside observers seem willing to equate racist, sexist behavior with the assumed "immaturity" of the gaming population as a whole--an assumption that discounts the fact *WoW*'s gaming population is largely working adults and college students.

While the interaction continuum provides us with a way to visualize the ways in which players move between the experiences of three distinct realms, it is perhaps an incomplete picture of the complexities of online experience. In my experience, players do not differentiate between the realms of experience; rather, they experience the game holistically and do not think of the social and the virtual-active (narrative) portions of the game as separate entities. In fact, players are more likely to differentiate between the various activities in the game--questing, battlegrounds, raids, dungeons, and exploration--than they are the various realms of experience. This failure to recognize the position of the social realm as a waypoint between the real and the virtual is part of what renders the experience such a problematic one: players simply do not see the potential for the dated structures of feeling of the virtual realm to move into the social and, possibly, the real world. Most do not recognize that their experiences online may in fact reshape their understanding of the real world over time.

I have often referred to violent acts within the game, a fact that may appear at first as a red herring within a larger discussion of race and racism. However, I believe that the combination of 19th century racism and violent acts on raced bodies poses a conundrum when paired with narrative ideologies that seep into the social realm. I do not suggest that a Horde player will want to attack every white person s/he sees directly after logging onto the game, but I do believe that the pedagogies of violent racial conflict within the game will translate in a subconscious way to the real world. In a world that is already so racially conflicted, already so confrontational toward Others, it seems a disservice to perpetuate an adversarial ideology between the races, even subconsciously.

In the following chapter, I will examine the educational and regulatory role of the guild as both a social space and as an assistance program within the game and its methods of maintaining *World of Warcraft* as a space of heteronormative whiteness. In particular, I will tie the game's economic systems to the performance of racial identity online. The capitalist structures of *WoW* play a distinct role in shaping player behavior and forming game subscribers into efficient and acquiescent game citizens.

Chapter 4: Citizen of the World (of Warcraft): Pedagogies of Racial Acquiescence

> *Since Vanilla, One of the main reasons that made wow unique was its ability to make yourself wealthy. This was an exciting adventure to explore, gather, collect and create. Being able to walk around with new wealth and gear ceated* [sic] *a feeling of pride in your toon. There was a feeling of the ol west approach. (unlimited possibilities).*
>
> --Hurtlockurr, in a Battle.net forum
>
> May 27, 2013

At his farewell address to gathered Scout Leaders at the 1937 Boy Scout Jamboree, Scouting founder Robert Baden-Powell reiterated his long-held stance that the Scouting organizations serve to:

> produce healthy, happy, helpful citizens, of both sexes, to eradicate the prevailing narrow self-interest; personal, political, sectarian and national, and to substitute for it a broader spirit of self-sacrifice and service in the cause of humanity; and thus to develop mutual goodwill and cooperation not only within our country but abroad, between all countries. (scout.org)

Baden-Powell's address serves as a succinct summation of the principles that guide his master treatise, the 1908 *Scouting for Boys*. Under the British-born Baron's direction, Scouts throughout the world learn the essentials of progressive-era citizenship, a process that teaches not only what it means to be a responsible leader but to be a middle-class

man in the United States.[36] According to historian David Macleod, the scouting movement evolved out of early twentieth century Protestant concerns over the changing lives of middle-class youth in urban environments (xii). Scouting represented a romantic return to the "primitivism" of the rural environment and fostered the development of valued skills such as self-sufficiency, collaborative teamwork, brotherly commitment, service, and leadership in a rapidly modernizing world that demonstrated a "zeal for efficiency and increasingly militant patriotism" (xii). While not the first institution of this type--the YMCA and the Boys Brigade preceded the scouting movement in the US--The Boy Scouts of America certainly served (and continues to serve) as the most prominent character and community building apparatus for urban youth.

As Macleod explains, the early 20th century, Progressive middle-class defined and supported the political, economic, and cultural values of the United States (xiv). He posits that scouting provided a method through which middle-class parents and instructors could control both the developing characters and behaviors of their sons--who, free of the labor asked of working-class sons of farm families--enjoyed unstructured leisure time. Early 20th century white, middle-class families had just begun to realize their social and political influence in the US and wanted to ensure that they could pass such influence to their children. As a result, they "regarded strength and virtue as vital if the rising generation of the middle class was to maintain its social position", and thus

[36] The recent controversy over whether homosexual boys would be allowed to participate in the Boy Scouts of America was only resolved in May of 2013; homosexual men remain banned from scout leadership (Advocate.com July 31, 2014). This ban on homosexual leaders may imply that the BSA believes homosexual adult males are ill-suited to shape young boys into the model, middle-class leaders of tomorrow, and that only those adults who conform to an undefined heteronormative male ideal are suitable for leadership.

needed to ensure that their sons' leisure time would not turn to loitering or trouble-making. Parents noted that their young men responded less favorably to parent and teacher demands for "proper behavior", and desired a way to mould their young men into the leaders and businessmen who would ensure their continued influence on US policy. Perhaps more importantly, they desired a method of instilling traditional white, middle class values in urban youth--an idea of particular importance as city centers not only housed the rising middle class, but a newly freed black population and growing immigrant population. The scouting method, already popular in the United Kingdom, became a way to introduce new forms of discipline and instruction into the lives of America's boys through systems of play and achievement. It also became the primary method for ensuring that young, white men spent their leisure time in the company of like-minded peers.[37] The Boy Scouts' values mirrored those of middle-class America and provided a structured social outlet for these urban youths, teaching not only useful skills and build strong moral character, but instilling middle-class values such as model citizenship, character development, and self-reliance into often-recalcitrant youth. The Boy Scouts of America sought (and seeks) to create the leaders of tomorrow through military discipline, scaffolded achievement, and cooperative play/exploration.

As incongruous as it may seem, scouting's pedagogical method for the production of the white male subject serves as a useful framework for examining the idiosyncrasies

[37] While never officially segregated, the BSA allowed individual councils to decide whether they would allow non-white children into scouting troops. Many southern councils banned black youth while other councils denied them the ability to wear the scouting uniform. Those councils that allowed black troops generally formed all-black groups rather than mixing boys of different races together. Asian communities also formed separate packs. The Boy Scouts of America did not racially integrate until 1974 (npr.org).

of the *World of Warcraft* universe, as it parallels many of the guiding principles of game interaction. On the surface, it may appear that *WoW* mirrors scouting only in its use of an achievement system, with digital awards that serve as tangible badges of recognition within the game. For example, completing a series of minor achievements for each of the in-game holiday events over the course of a year (a difficult feat which requires considerable diligence) awards a rare flying mount that players may ride in public--an action that seems not so far removed from attaining the rank of Eagle Scout. However, when games model the Boy Scout method of character building and group training, players achieve and demonstrate skill through conspicuous consumption rather than through learning tangible skills and demonstrating leadership. I posit that *World of Warcraft* shapes players into ideal virtual citizens through group training and digital character-building (not to be confused with the act of leveling a character). However, not all the pedagogical methods of the game are immediately visible, particularly to the immersed player. *WoW* shapes its players through several discrete pedagogical methods including direct tutorial, social guidance/pressure, and through naturalizing/inculcating an economic imaginary of neoliberal production and consumption. The game occupies the leisure time of young men and women, though with an older target audience, and teaches players to model ideal virtual-citizenry through scaffolded learning environments and achievement. It teaches and, in fact, demands cooperative play and collective activity in order to ensure the progression of the many and to generate capital for the game system. It provides leadership opportunities that rarely affect the overall governing structure of the game.

These pedagogical methods are largely governmental in nature, as they shape the player's conduct so that s/he becomes the ideal cyber-citizen--groups of players that self-regulate their own behaviors in order to become successful consumers and knowledge producers for the society of the game as a whole. Despite ten years and four expansions to the game, the central measure of success has not changed: players must kill increasingly high-level bosses, and to do so they must acquire legendary and distinctive armor and weapons (gear). A good piece of gear enables a player to go to better dungeons and acquire even better gear. When many (never most) players have gathered some of the best gear, the game releases a new expansion with more levels and even *more* superior gear. The cycle never ends--a player constantly strives to self-improve, and s/he must rely on the support and help of a guild in order to reach the greater heights of achievement within the game. In turn, the guild helps regulate and optimize the individual's economic output. It helps to teach the individual the rules of the social space, both spoken and unspoken. It monitors and provides feedback on a player's performance as a producer, as a team player, and as a member of their working group (character class--warlock, shaman, priest, etc). In short, the individuals who form a guild act as the trained citizens who become governing entities in their own right, monitoring the progress of players through the stages of development into active and efficient contributors to the game's generation of cultural capital. Players perform immaterial labor that serves to strengthen *World of Warcraft* as a social space, a cultural product, and shaper of online behaviors--all with little direct interference from the game's designers or moderators.

I am here defining governmentality in Foucault's terms: government, according to Foucault, is not a guiding hand or even ruling power, but the process of establishing the conditions in which citizens/subjects act autonomously to specific ends—here, the general welfare of the game's player population as well as the perpetuation and growth of *WoW*'s game economies (the in-game economy and the relative value of the franchise). It works through "producing and organizing knowledge about the population, thus creating the conditions by which governing appears to do itself" (Werry xxiv). Throughout my discussion of neoliberal capitalism, raid performance and preparation, and white masculinity, this chapter will demonstrate how *WoW* shapes citizen behavior and, perhaps more importantly, how it creates citizens who self-regulate in the performance of unspoken cultural norms. I will focus on how *WoW* indirectly shapes players into productive digital citizens. Here I examine performance in terms of in-game economic success and efficiency, ability to problem-solve through research and timely experimentation, and adoption of the accepted modes of self-identification within the virtual space. I posit that Blizzard maintains *WoW* as an impossibly perfect neoliberal economic space--a free market in which players can buy and sell goods and services without a governing hand on the financial reins--and presents it as a mythological meritocracy in which all players can achieve greatness through hard work and almost absurd dedication to the game. A close examination of the "character building" practices of *WoW,* however, exposes the largely unacknowledged consequences of neoliberal design--specifically addressing issues of game access, leisure time, and the pressure to adopt white, heteronormative, male performance practices in order to function within the

social realm of the game. Here I refer to the ways in which *WoW* trains players to build human capital by performing immaterial labor, taking on leadership roles within a guild, and participating in the game economy as good consumers. Studying *WoW* through this optic exposes the racial biases underpinning so-called post-racial meritocracies.

We should note that early scouting has been critiqued for its connections to eugenics and colonial authority, for its narrow view of race and sex, and for indoctrinating its members a profoundly conservative hegemonic project linking disciplined white hetero-masculinity to progressive era internationalism. If *WoW* has mirrored the pedagogical techniques of the Boy Scouts of America, what, then, are the values it is attempting to instill in its player population? I argue that, like the BSA, *World of Warcraft* teaches players to perform white, heteronormative masculinity by providing them with access to a neoliberal economic imaginaries of entertainment; few of the players I spoke to recognized that the game's pedagogical methods--methods that mirror many of the training and values systems of scouting organizations--may in fact be working to train players in the performance of recognizably white and middle class forms of economic engagement. However, as I have posited in the previous two chapters, players come to the game with social identities from the real world; therefore, each player experiences this training differently. While some players (white, male, heterosexual) will respond more immediately to *WoW*'s particular mode of training in capitalist production and small-group leadership, many must not only learn how to operate as good economic producers but how to alter their behavior to fit more fully into *WoW* as a white space.

This chapter begins with a detailed ethnographic field notes depicting an average day as a *WoW* citizen and an analysis of their implications within the game space and provides an overview of the duties and "jobs" required of an active *WoW* player and guild member. I follow this with a discussion of immaterial, playful labor within the digital space and how it alters a player's understanding of his/her role in that world. I pair this with an analysis of the various economic systems that influence *WoW*'s design and how they create an environment that shapes player behavior along traditionally white, male lines. This proceeds into a discussion of *WoW* as a meritocracy and of how access to leisure time/funds alters a player's ability to engage with the game. I focus in particular on how real-world race and gender minority progress is impeded by the game's design as an ostensible meritocracy. The chapter closes with a discussion of how the guild shapes player behaviors with subtle pedagogical methods.

A Typical Friday Night

It's Friday afternoon and my classes are finished for the week. Sitting at my desk, I feel a brief pang of guilt as I push the pile of readings for the next week aside to make room for my to-do list and a huge glass of ice tea. Tonight is raid night, and there are still a lot of chores to do before I'm ready to enter Karazhan with the rest of the high-level guild members. My list tells me that I need to take care of my 25 daily quests to earn some cash, refill my soul-shard bag, purchase some health and mana potions, sell any additional materials in the auction house, re-enchant some new armor, and freshen my

memory on the strategies for tonight's dungeon run. It's a fairly lengthy chore list for the amount of time I have before the raid, so I need to get cracking.

Since I'll be the only warlock on the run tonight, I'll need to make sure that I have enough supplies to perform the tasks that only a warlock can do, namely opening portals and creating soulstones (a sort of resurrection stone that I can give one member of the raid, usually the healer). I need to fill my bag with soulshards--the crystals extracted from the bodies of the creatures/people I kill in game. These shards allow me to open portals for other players to transport between the dungeon and Orgrimmar, the sanctuary city that houses a convenient auction house and supply vendors. I'll also need make sure I have enough healing and mana potions to keep my avatar alive and with enough energy to cast her most damaging spells.[38] *I can't make these potions as they require my character to have mastered the alchemy and herbalism professions (I'm a tailor and enchanter--each character can only have two primary professions). I asked a friend in the guild to make me some health potions earlier this week, but she hasn't gotten them to me yet. India isn't scheduled to come on the raid tonight, so I'm going to need to buy them outright from the auction house. This means I'll need to dip into my carefully hoarded gold stash to pay for them. I'm hoping that twenty of each will be enough for the long evening of raiding. Last week we were in Kara for more than seven hours and I had to restock halfway through the raid, which held everyone else up. I'm a little angry that I have to drop so much money on potions, though, as I've been saving my money for a new*

[38] Mana is probably best thought of as "magic energy"--it is a fixed supply of blue liquid that allows my character to cast spells within the gameworld. Each spell uses a fixed amount of mana, so its use must be monitored closely.

staff so that I can do more damage in raids. A couple other people in the group called me out for being low on the overall rankings. They tell me that a warlock should be in the top three of the group and I was near the bottom. If I continue to do poorly, I'll likely be dropped from the raid roster if and when a better warlock joins the guild.

This will be our tenth run through Kara, and we've yet to make it all the way through the dungeon before people start dropping from the group. This is partly because our group is the optimal compositing of a raiding party--we are a healer short, our main tank can't quite keep the focus of the bosses on himself alone, and no one is doing enough damage. We have to adjust and readjust our strategies for tackling each of the big bosses (all of which require specific tactics) and we're not able to use the strategy guides to our best advantage because of group composition. I've spent the past month retooling my character to make her more useful to the group. For tonight's raid I've completely altered her specialization. Aktobe used to be a destruction warlock who fought with fireballs and dark flames, but now she's an affliction warlock who places damage-over-time spells (DOTS) on her enemies to kill them with pestilence and curses. I've had a week to practice my new skills in some smaller, 5-man runs. The new spec is more difficult to play and requires a lot of extra monitoring. I've had to install several applications--DOTimer, Recount, and Deadly BossMods to name a few--in order to keep track of the timing on my curses, track how much damage I'm doing, and keep better track of each phase of the boss fights so that I can react accordingly. The changes seem to be working, though. I've done very well in the smaller dungeon groups I've played with this week and feel ready to hold my own in the guild excursion into Kara.

It's 3pm after my computer finishes loading WoW *and I've successfully logged in. I have four hours before the raid begins, which gives me about three and a half hours to finish my chores before the group starts gathering for the raid. I begin by running my dailies in Outland. Daily quests are a steady source of income, allowing me to earn over 100 gold a day if I complete them all. I need all the gold I can get in order to keep my wallet flush after buying potions for tonight's run. I can kill two birds with one stone and gather the 28 soulshards I'll need for tonight as I kill the necessary creatures for the dailies. These quests are mindless thanks to countless repetitions, so I chat with the few people who are online this time of day. My guild leader happens to be one of those present, so I make sure to mention my excitement about tonight's run; it never hurts to remind him how much I enjoy going on these group raids, even if my performance isn't always the finest. My dailies take ninety minutes.*

After completing my dailies and filling my soul bag, I run to the auction house and purchase my potions. I shouldn't have waited this long to restock my supply--Friday is a raid night for most guilds, and the prices are always higher during the work week when fewer people have time to collect and sell items on the Auction House (AH). The best time to buy would have been after last weekend's raid as the AH prices drop on Saturday morning. Low supply and high demand on a Friday afternoon makes for an expensive shopping trip; I spend over 300 gold replenishing my potion stores. I'll need to be extra sure that I do my dailies every day this week in order to make up for the expenditure. To help offset the costs of my potions, I quickly list some raw materials collected earlier in the week on the Auction House. Primal Air and Primal Earth are both

selling for good prices, so I use my "Auctioneer" modification to undercut the current lowest price by 2%. Hopefully they'll sell quickly--I know I'm not the only person prepping for raid online tonight. If my stack sells, that should bring in another 100g.

After the spending spree in the AH, I head over to my bank vault to drop some gold into the guild coffers (another 50 gold). I don't strictly need *to donate, but all officers in the guild are expected to contribute on a regular basis. I try to put 50 gold into the bank each Friday to make sure that our gold stash continues to be able to support our growing guild population--many of whom are lower-level and not "good gold farmers". These "newb" guild members often have to draw on the guild bank to pay for expensive armor repairs (a privilege that I have but usually choose not to use). As a leader in the guild, I see to its needs before my own, though this behavior is certainly not selfless. My main character is level-capped and has decent (not great) armor. I am now in a stage of tweaking her attributes and improving her gear to allow her to attend higher-level raids--an activity that is very difficult to do on my own. I have to rely on the best players in our guild to help me with gathering supplies and strengthening/making efficient my play-style so that I can continue to improve at a steady pace. Without their support, I will be unable to find raid groups,*[39] *unable to acquire high-level materials at an affordable price, and unable to keep up with the game's patches (which regularly change how my character deals or takes damage). I have to remain in their good graces, and contributing to the guild bank at regular intervals is a public and measurable method of doing so.*

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[39] This experience takes place nearly two years before Blizzard introduced the "Looking for Group" and "Looking for Raid" applications within the game. These services place solo players into randomly-assembled groups so that even non-guilded players can attend raids.

After I make my contributions, I remove the ingredients I've been collecting over the past week from my personal bank vault. It's time to put my character's enchanter skills to use and re-enchant my gear (armor and weapons) to enhance my character's new skill specialization. The process isn't difficult and would be considerably more expensive if I hadn't been able to collect, beg, and trade for all of the ingredients I needed. It takes me nearly an hour to create and apply new enchantments to my armor. The spells enhance my damage across the board and should be a huge boon when I get into the dungeon, but they have taken up a large portion of my carefully horded enchantment supplies. I'll need to restock next week so that I can create some enchanted scrolls to add to the bank vault for other players to use. High-level enchanters are rare and I'm one of only two in our guild. I've concentrated on improving my own gear this week, but I'll need to help some others next week to save them the expense of acquiring enchanted scrolls from the auction house. Snippety, the other enchanter, has been offline for the last month due to a fried motherboard. It's up to me to ensure that the other raiding members of the group have the ability to enchant their gear until Snip has the money to build a new computer.

With a little over an hour to spare, I finally turn my attention to YouTube. In last week's run, I made several rather catastrophic mistakes during the raid. Twice I caused the raid group to wipe (a complete failure in which every person dies). I have no desire to repeat these mistakes, particularly as I suspect my guild leader has neared the end of his patience with my mistakes. I quickly navigate to the selected videos that our guild leader suggested all raid attendees watch before the next run. I spent a good part of the week

watching the videos for the last Opera Event, Nightbane, and the Curator (especially since I caused us to wipe twice on the Curator event), so now I quickly look through a boss we haven't encountered in our progression through the dungeon so I'll be ready if we get that far tonight. The video provides commentary and instructions complete with directional circles and lines similar to the NFL's 1st and Ten digital overlay system. The clarity of the tutorial gives me a much needed confidence boost. I will not be the weak link tonight.

It has been a productive three hours. At seven, I stretch, grab a sandwich and (highly caffeinated) soda out of the fridge, and settle back into my computer chair to wait for my raid group to log on. I feel prepared for tonight's raid both materially and intellectually. One can only hope that the past week of work will pay off and that I will receive some new, high-level gear from the bosses we kill tonight. All together, I have probably spent eight hours preparing for this week's raid, which is likely as much as the guild's co-leaders spent. While I'm not as highly ranked as they, I feel as if I need to prepare at least as much (if not more) than they so that they don't feel that they're carrying me through the raid.

The above description is typical of my pre-raid routine: a self-analysis of weaknesses that might prove fatal to my team, generating capital for myself and my guild, procuring useful or rare items that will make me a more effective player, and researching both my role as a warlock and raid member. These tasks require that I log on to the game daily in order to perform quests for money, check the status of my listings in the auction house, browse for expensive items during their optimal sale times (when

prices are lower), and keep up with my guild-mates in order to offer or receive advice on character improvement. During my time as an active member of a raid-group--a period of nearly two years--I was spending upwards of thirty hours a week in-game. Nearly a third of this time was spent actively preparing for the next raid or supporting agendas that would improve my game performance across the board. My experience is not abnormal; anthropologist Bonnie Nardi describes similar dedication to her role in a raiding guild in her ethnography *My Life as a Night Elf Priest*, recalling a routine of checking her auction listings each morning before answering email and spending hours online in the evenings preparing her character for large group activities (9). In his 2002 study of MMOs (which later became an analysis of *WoW*), game theorist Nick Yee's data indicated that they typical *WoW* user spends 22 hours per week online, an outcome that he claims is due to the operant conditioning of the early tutorials of the game (Yee, "Skinner Boxes"). By operant conditioning, I refer to psychologist B. F. Skinner's theory that rewarding behaviors results in the repetition of said behavior. *WoW* rewards plays for nearly every action they perform in game; the guild also provides rewards in the form of social capital. Players return to the game for the benefits of social interaction and to gain digital rewards (gold and gear) for their labors.

My duties in-game extended beyond my personal raid preparations. As the warlock class leader of our guild, I was expected to stay abreast of systemic changes to warlock spells and abilities from game code patches and provide guidance and advice to newer players trying to learn how to play a warlock. While online, I would often engage in conversations (many of them debates more than advice sessions) about changes to

spell rotations, whether the destruction or demonology specializations were going to be better choices than affliction, or how best to avoid drawing the attention of a boss in a dungeon (warlocks are notoriously squishy). My guild leader also expected me to play a role in helping new players become acclimated to the guild and the game, to monitor guild chat and ensure that players did not violate either guild chat rules or Blizzard's Terms of Service, and to be an active participant on the forums of our guild's external website. The eleven other guild leaders and I were very active bureaucrats, performing myriad duties in addition to (and often during) our playtime. We did not do this for our own benefit alone (though we certainly did benefit); as a guild leader, I felt the need to contribute to the guild so that we could augment the welfare of the guild population as a whole.

It is reasonable to ask why adults with fulltime jobs, fulltime families, or fulltime coursework would choose to dedicate so much of their free time to managerial roles, farming roles, crafting roles, and research roles within a space of leisure. Yee initially asserted that the game trains players to spend many hours within its digital environs, comparing the early stages of such games (the first 20 levels in *WoW*) to a kind of virtual Skinner Box.[40] He states that in *EverQuest* (an older MMO on which large parts of the *WoW* system are modeled), "the presence of multi-layered and overlapping goals in the game allows players to pursue multiple rewards concurrently" (Yee, "Skinner Boxes"), and that completion of these seemingly endless goals satisfies the capstone of the Maslow

[40] Skinner boxes are small glass boxes in which operant conditioners can train rats to perform increasingly elaborate tasks for immediate reward. Once trained, the conditioner removes decreases the frequency of reward until the rat performs the task in the *hope* of a reward.

hierarchy of needs pyramid--that of self-transcendence. *WoW* offers players the chance to become heroes, but it also offers the immediate satisfaction of performing a task for the betterment of a group in a low-stakes environment. Leadership work within the social structure of a guild, according to Yee, offers a level of potential success that is often unavailable in the real world. Expanding on this thought, I would posit that players work diligently because the social space of the guild functions as a substitute social circle in the digital space—one that rivals the importance of social circles in the real world. Within these circles, players may experience not just leadership, but small and large successes as a part of supportive group. Within the digital real, a player's efforts toward production and his/her efforts to be an effective leader are very real forms of work that take both temporal and fiscal dedication. Players engage in immaterial *playbor* as not only a form of self-investment, but to generate cultural capital within the game.

Immaterial Playbor

In 2005, games scholar Julian Kücklich described the process of laboring within ludic digital spaces as *playbor*. The term refers to the chore-like work that players perform within many contemporary videogames. When Kücklich first employed the term, he referred to the labor of creating modifications or extensions of professionally released video games, but I would posit that the term can be applied to the labor necessary to participate in a virtual capitalist system. Kücklich's definition of the term playbor refers to the masking of labor with the ideology of play--an act that "disguises the process of self-expropriation as self-expression" fibreculturejournal.org). This is particularly

interesting as Johan Huizinga's seminal work *Homo Ludens* (and Caillois' later expansion of that work) clearly defines play as non-productive. Of course, Huizinga was writing in 1935 and perhaps anticipated neither the possibility of the work and leisure spaces-- distinctly divided under the early 20th century Fordist model-- coalescing so that playful behaviors and economic behaviors align. The mid-century rise of immaterial labor as a prominent form of professional drudgery and the creation and popularization of online worlds that are so completely removed from everyday reality are also aspects of play that Huizinga could not have predicted. As a result, MMOs break the oft-referenced mould of play that Huizinga and Caillois describe. However, I believe that these two scholars would still describe *WoW* as a playful space despite its emphasis on consumption and labor.

Much of the playful labor performed within *WoW* is less concerned with the digitally-material goods of the online space and more concerned with incentivizing players to perform immaterial labor within and concerning the game. I refer here to the voluntary communicational behaviors, to the development of collaborative processes, to the gathering/provision of communal goods, and to the labor that goes into developing the community (guild) itself. As Kücklich explains the characteristics of immaterial playbor thus:

> like other forms of affective or immaterial labour, playbor is not productive in the sense of resulting in a product, but it is the process itself that generates value. The means of production are the players themselves, but insofar as they only exist within play environments by virtue of their representations, and their

> representations are usually owned by the providers of these environments, the players cannot be said to be fully in control of these means. (Forum response June 25 2009).[41]

This service-based labor matches almost directly Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's description of immaterial labor as "labor that produces an immaterial good, such as a service, a cultural product, knowledge, or communication" (290), and in particular is characterized by "industrial production that has been informationalised", "analytical and symbolic tasks," and "production and manipulation of affect" (293). The work that players put into creating tutorials, teaching other players strategy, and even developing/maintaining the complex guild rule systems is immaterial labor. Maurizio Lazzarato explains that immaterial labor consists of two different aspects of labor:

> first the "informational content of the commodity" [referring to] the changes taking place in workers labor processes [...and second] as regards the activity that produces the "cultural content" of the commodity, immaterial labor involves a series of activities that are not normally recognized as "work". (Lazzarato *Immaterial Labor*)

In *WoW* "informational content" might refer the labor of learning to play the game--particularly the ins and outs of online communication, how to operate an avatar, and creating and maintaining a guild. It may also refer to the creation and dissemination of the online (external to game) reference tools that allow a player to research the game so that they might improve their skills. *WoW*'s "cultural content", on the other hand, might

[41] https://lists.thing.net/pipermail/idc/2009-June/003664.html [FIX citation]

refer more to the various fan videos (machinema), artwork, and forum debates that serve as a means of free game promotion. In fact, we could easily argue that digital worlds are predicated upon the idea of immaterial labor as the process of designing and maintaining a digital place space is, in itself, an immaterial activity (Dyer-Witherford 5). However, I have chosen to focus my attentions on the labor of the game player, for whom the rewards of his/her "work" seem to be as immaterial as the labor itself. Within the context of *WoW*, the digital citizen's playboring hours create not tangible rewards, but affective rewards that please the player and serve as a representational reminder of his/her effectiveness as a player. More importantly, hours spent online allow players to create affective, instrumental bonds with other players that they can capitalize on in further play. This description sounds suspiciously like a form of digital sharecropping--a system through which players not only labor within the system and pay a tithe to do so, but also in which the players generate the value of the game. Game participants playbor within a world that is the intellectual property of the Blizzard Corporation--a company whose lengthy Terms of Service allows it to cut off a player's access to the game at any time it deems appropriate. Players extract profit from the game in the form of entertainment, but do not have any ownership of the avatars through which they perform the playful labor that keeps the game, and its economy, spinning. In fact, players pay a monthly fee of about $15 to maintain access to characters, goods, and guild mates--though most guilds also maintain contact through forums, group websites, and voice-over-internet-phone

services.[42] Failure to pay this monthly fee results in account suspension and a complete loss of game access.

Most of the players I interviewed viewed their subscription fee as just that--a fee for access to an entertainment service. One guild mate stated, "Hey--fifteen bucks a month is a hell of a lot less than going out to dinner or the movies every weekend" (Interview September 21, 2010). We should, however, note that this fee does not factor in the cost of purchasing and maintaining a personal computer, a high-speed internet connection, or the cost of the game itself which is between $45 and $60 per game/expansion. In the seven years that I played the game, I spent nearly $1500 on the game, expansions, and subscription fees alone. This does not include two new computers, character migration fees (moving between servers), and $50+ a month in high-speed internet fees. My investment, however, is near worthless despite such expenditure and the over 395 total days invested in my main character alone. As I have no ownership of my characters, I cannot legally sell them to recoup my expenditures.[43] However, players do not invest their time and money into *WoW* for entertainment alone; they do so because their investment has a quantifiable return. Time and money spent on the game generates both social capital and in-game currency--the player's "cut" of their immaterial labor--and thus time invested into the researching, disseminating, and creating the myriad guides,

[42] Subscription fees vary based on the length of the subscription. A month-to-month subscription is just under $15, but a six month subscription (billed in full) grants the player a $2 discount per month.
[43] There is an active black market for *WoW* characters. I could have chosen to sell my best (highest level, most competitively geared) character for around $800 shortly before the release of the *Mists of Pandaria* expansion, but most of the players in my experience choose not to do this. I chose not to because it is a violation of the game's Terms of Service (violation of which results in a permanent ban from the game) and because I have a significant emotional attachment to my character. Should I ever choose to return to the game, Aktobe will be there, waiting for me.

walkthroughs, fan videos, and other reference materials is time invested into the game as well. Ironically, it is the players' productive labor within and in support of the game that generates and augments the entertainment service's/product's value, blurring the line between consumption and production (Kucklich 343). As a large percentage of what the game sells is social interaction, rather than content, the game cannot exist as the same valuable commodity without the presence and participation of its players.

Hardt and Negri posit that immaterial labor has become the leading (or "hegemonic") form of labor (*Empire*, 2004), even though it may not constitute the majority of labor performed in capitalist countries. What I find particularly interesting is that this shift has seeped into our leisure spaces--so much so that playbor has quickly expanded beyond a description of the blurred line between online play and labor and has begun seeping into a description of increasingly "gamified" real-world workspaces. For example, companies such as Siemens and IBM have begun to rely on games and simulations such as "IBM Innov8" and "Siemens PlantVille" to train/educate their workers, software companies such as DevHub offer companies the ability to track project completion through game-like trackers, and sites like SCVNGR integrate technology into the age-old team-building exercise of the scavenger hunt as a method of building brand awareness. Playbor has become an effective method of obscuring the more tedious aspects of continuing education and brainstorming/team building in many businesses, both small and large.

Within *World of Warcraft*, I have noted that playbor works in several ways. **Firstly**, it produces the value of the game--its social and cultural content, and, on

occasion, its design (there are several player anecdotes that have become components of the game). I believe that while the game is highly diverting and its storyline engaging, the most interesting component of the game is its ability to build community. My commitment to the game directly followed my involvement with a guild; in times where I did not belong to a guild, I often took lengthy--months long--breaks from the game. However, these communities require substantial work to maintain, both as a member and as a guild leader. **Secondly**, playbor within *WoW* produces affective rewards for the player. An investment (temporal and monetary) in *World of Warcraft* provides immediate rewards in the form of social belonging, approval, and relationality. It is also an effective method for producing social conformity; failure to conform to the behavioral norms of social interaction within the game will not yield this affective award, no matter how skilled the player. **Thirdly**, playbor trains cyber-citizens in a specific mode of conduct that is transposable to other areas of the economy. The savvy (efficient) *WoW* player learns to monitor the fluctuations of the market and to buy/sell on a schedule; s/he monitors upcoming patches to see what items will gain and lose value, and spends considerable time farming highly sought after materials to sell. The most successful *WoW* players are full participants in the game's economy and learn to operate within the economic ideology of the game. Playbor therefore produces value ("gold" and "reputation points") within the gameworld of *WoW*--thus ensuring the advancement/welfare of the guild/individual. The majority of in-game items require purchase with either game gold, reputation points (earned by completing quests for specific NPC groups), or (most recently) through credit-card purchase in the Blizzard store (limited edition items only).

Currency is therefore the lifeblood of the game; players need gold and points to purchase gear and support items (potions, food, etc) and guilds need gold and points to support their players and shore up their position in the realm leader boards.

What *WoW* does particularly well is align all these things with one another, invisibly suturing them together so that the player feels that they labor less to benefit the guild, the game's designers, or Blizzard, but for the pleasurable self-advancement and self-enrichment--a distinctly neoliberal goal--even as governmental conditions channel playboring energy to these other ends/entities. The player's labor is extracted and expropriated and the player him/herself distanced from the work of the game; his/her labor becomes subsumed beneath the ethos of play while others gain very tangible, real-world benefits from players' monetary and temporal commitment to the system. Moreover, *WoW* trains players to engage in a specific form of economic content that not only perpetuates its existence, but encourages players to perform in highly racialized ways. In the next section, we will examine how *WoW* capitalist philosophy draws from three distinct moments in history in order to create a blended environment of feudal, liberal, and neoliberal economic systems that are, in the end, white and male modes of production/productivity

The Economic Practices of an MMO

In order to discuss how *World of Warcraft* shapes a player's behaviors and performances within a white, male, hegemonic paradigm through game-world pedagogies, it is necessary to define the contributing ideologies of the game's economic

practices and philosophies. While I initially defined *WoW* as a purely neoliberal space, I have come to redefine the game's economic imaginary as an amalgam of several paradigms: feudal guild communal economics, progressive liberal economics, and neo-liberal economics. The game cherry picks facets of each of these eras of economic development in order to create one that is confusingly familiar and unfamiliar all at once. The with whom I played over the course of this study paid little attention to how the system was designed or the economic philosophies underpinning it; rather, players concentrate their efforts on working and exploiting the system to their best advantage, never recognizing themselves as participating in a capitalist system that informs and influences the performance of the majority of in-game activity.

WoW's system of labor and commerce is a complex and interwoven mixture of western economic practices that structure "labor" through several player activities. On the individual level, a player earns gold by completing quests, gathering unrefined goods to sell in the virtual auction house, crafting those same goods into larger usable objects (potions, armor, enchanted scrolls, etc.), or finding (or buying) and (re)selling rare items. The player uses this gold for character maintenance, the purchase of novelty items, guild tithes, and the purchase of more useful or more-powerful items.[44] Guilds earn money through collective donation. Many guilds--though certainly not all--request either a fixed-

[44] By "more useful", I refer to the fact that not all items are available for universal player use. For example, the game limits each class of character to specific subsets of armor and weapons. A "caster" character (spell casting Warlock, Priest, or Mage) is limited to cloth armor rather than leather, plate, or chainmail. They will likewise be unable to use most melee weapons; for example, a Warlock can only equip staves, daggers, wands, and one-handed sword. The available magical bonuses on items will generally match the character's class attributes. Caster weapons generally provide a boost to the Intelligence attribute (which effects mana regeneration) rather than the Strength attribute (which determines how much damage a player can take before dying).

rate fee from their players or an estimated percentage of their weekly earnings. Additionally, guilds request that players deposit useful crafting materials or low to medium level armor/weapons in the bank vault so that lower-level players may benefit from the excess of the higher-level players. These communal banking practices allow lower-level characters to increase their crafting skills quickly and efficiently (without farming the materials for themselves), thus making them more valuable assets to the guild as a whole.[45] In my experience, guild leaders also sold off excess goods from the guild bank to add to its coffers. Guilds are therefore responsible for shaping a player's economic behavior, and thus shaping all in-game behavior as all game behavior is tied to capitalist production in some form.

While *WoW* is a multifaceted game that includes a number of modes of interaction and play, one of the primary driving forces of the game (aside from its perpetual war) is that of economic progress and continual self-improvement. The two ideas are intertwined, much as they are in the real world; improving one's character in *WoW* requires steady access to gold, and such steady access requires that the player invest a *significant* amount of time into regular game play. For many players, progress through the game can be measured in the acquisition of digital material goods alone (armor, weapons, mounts, pets, etc), the vast majority of which must either be purchased with gold, won in a battle that requires extensive prep work (and the spending of gold in

[45] In the *Wrath of the Lich King* expansion to the game, Blizzard introduced an automatic bonus to guild coffers; 5% of all money that players loot from monsters now goes directly to the guild bank. This is an additional 5% on top of the value of the looted gold and not an additional player tithe. At this same time, however, the guild bank updated so that guild leaders could expand the size of the vault for a substantial gold fee. As a result, most guilds that practiced tithing before this change chose to continue tithing or reduce the tithe amounts rather than abandon the practice entirely.

support of that goal), or crafted from in-game raw materials (some of which require gold to procure). Gold--a currency that drops from enemies and monsters--becomes the driving force of the game, but only insofar as it allows the player to purchase the things he wants or needs. A player's success, then, is not measured by the amount of gold in his/her bag, but by his or her ability to participate in the game economy through the acquisition of goods. The acquisition of goods, however, depends upon a continual and concerted effort to self-improve by keeping up with alterations to the game mechanics, studying the fluctuating marketplace and finding the best deals, and continuing to invest in the social guild space in order to reap the rewards of the communal support system.

Despite the fact that *WoW* is a game about war, battle, and honor, economics play a very direct role in almost every type of in-game action. The simplest transaction is through quest completion, which yields a payout in game gold. However, players can also trade goods and gold on the social level by using an in-game interface for player-to-player interactions (in which the code ensures that neither party can cheat the other). Likewise, the Auction House (AH) provides a monitored outlet where players can purchase and sell their goods for a nominal fee of 5% of their sale to the auction house. Game code regulates the AH, which is not (that we know of) manipulated by game designers between game updates. Prices of items on the AH are free to follow trends of inflation.[46] The only divergence from the "free trade" model is the presence of an

[46] The Blizzard Corp. does struggle with "gold farmers" selling game gold from external websites. This practice is forbidden by the game's Terms of Service and, if caught, the sellers receive a life-time ban from the game. Despite this, many players still find ways of purchasing gold from these websites and the influx of large amounts of gold at once often results in rampant inflation on the auction house. In recent years,

adjusted auction house fee for cross-faction trading between the Alliance and Horde. The cross-faction AH (of which there is only one) charges a 15% fee for all transactions; the faction AH (of which there are many) charge only 5%.[47] While the Auction House serves as the primary method for generating gold in-game, a player's primary goal will be to use AH earnings to ensure that s/he is well-armed/prepared for any conflict s/he might encounter. As *WoW* is a dynamic space that updates and expands on a regular basis (often rendering armor obsolete in the process), the game cycle becomes one of work and consumption. A player works, often for days or weeks, by gathering materials and earning gold so that s/he might either buy a piece of armor/weaponry outright or purchase a lower-level piece of gear so that s/he might enter dungeons where high-level gear might be rewarded from bosses. Obtaining a complete set of the highest level of armor requires a dedication to the game that borders on mania (or a willingness to purchase the armor from an illegal gold-seller for real money). The impulse to consume in order to enable further consumption becomes the raison d'être for *WoW*'s inhabitants; obtaining new gear trumps the thrill of killing a difficult boss as a group, so that even sociality and teamwork fall to the wayside when compared with the thrill of obtaining a new shiny object.

From these observations on how players do business within the game, we can extrapolate several key facts: First, that production and consumption are two of the primary defining features of *WoW* player citizenship. Second, that the guild is an internal player support-system that provides economic/crafting assistance, leveling advice, and a

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Blizzard's safeguards have improved and gold farmers have found it harder (though not impossible) to ply their trade online.

[47] We should note that players cannot trade face-to-face across factions.

social base for the player. In return, the player usually contributes to the guild through a tithing system (gold) and/or a donation system (items/materials). Third, that the game's design accounts for the presence of guilds and has supported (through patches and updates) the expanded role of the guild community as an organizing structure for labor, efficient economic participation, and online social events. And fourth, that Blizzard regulates trade through the auction house and restrictive code, but otherwise does not interfere with consumer/seller practices unless the game's Terms of Service have been broken. These responsibilities draw from aspects of feudal, liberal, and neoliberal economic systems, as we will explore below.

The role of the guild is, perhaps, the most important part of economic interaction in the game. Guilds function as a third sector agency within the game, helping players learn how to perform within the various modes of conduct (social, economic, and playful) that the game requires the player to embody while operating under the aegis of their own mission/goals. In the real world, a third sector agency (sometimes also voluntary agency or non-profit organization) is an organization that works to oversee some aspect of social welfare (social service, environment, education) whose needs are not met by a governing body. In the digital realm, the body of the guild helps newer or lower-level players advance through the game, providing sound advice on everything from the best place to farm crafting materials to the fastest way to make gold. They often play the game alongside these weaker players in order to help them advance more quickly. In this sense, guilds within *World of Warcraft* serve as both advising entity and social space for the player; no individual player will be as strong on their own as they will be with the

support of a guild. *WoW*, then, is a ludic space of altruism within a distinctly neoliberal world.

The supportive and organizational tasks of guild communities directly mirror medieval guilds from Western feudal societies. Medieval guilds worked as support systems for merchants and craftsmen. These guilds served multiple purposes including: pacing members through developmental levels of training (apprentice, journeyman, and master), providing assistance for the sick/injured, serving as protection for their members and their goods while traveling, and developed trade secrets (such as dye recipes for dyers and weavers or metallurgical secrets for blacksmiths) for their members to use in the plying of their craft. Members of guilds paid a tithe for these services and also served in civic capacities (such as in local militias). It's difficult to ignore the similarities between the Medieval European guild system and the role of the guilds as scripted within *WoW* as the online communities tend to motivate and teach less experienced players through the game, help them with goods/gold when needed, serves as a brute squad that will retaliate for enemy player attacks in the larger game environment, and share tips and tricks to becoming a better and more efficient player (as a consumer, seller, fighter, and community member). Further, as media scholars Nick de Peuter and Nick Dyer-Witheford explain, "Guilds act as channels of communication between the corporate sovereigns (Blizzard) and their subjects, airing grievances, providing sounding boards for opinion about game changes" (131), an act that essentially allows the guild to self-regulate its own behavior.

The persistence of guilds must be seen as one of the characteristics that enable them to act as structural units of governance. At the same time, this persistence is by no means absolute, as nothing in the code of virtual worlds prevents guilds from disbanding. The ties that bind a guild together are rather economic in nature, as they ‘‘require players to voluntarily donate goods, services or currency’’ (Burke, 2004), and players expect a ‘‘return on investment’’ from their donations. As Taylor emphasizes, the membership in guilds typically allows players to ‘‘level up’’ more quickly, and to play more ‘‘efficiently’’—especially in what she calls the ‘‘high-end game’’ (44). They are, in short, a form of collectivist organization that ensures the welfare, prosperity, and advancement of their members.

The principles of progressive liberalism are likewise present within the construction of the game--namely the presence of a regulated market economy. As early 20th century progressivism introduced a form of capitalism that drew from both liberal ideas of "free" markets and socialist policies created to benefit the US population as a whole. Progressive liberals concentrated on a redistribution of wealth to encourage equality. *WoW's* continued focus on absolute player equality within the game *WoW*'s system of trade and sale is an ostensibly "free", laissez-faire model, though I will complicate this idea later near the end of this section. Regulations such a ban on out-of-game trade on Ebay or other online sales sites limits economic interaction to the somewhat limited auction house and trade system. Blizzard does not, to our knowledge,

set prices or correct market inflation, though we know it has the capacity to do so.[48] There exists an undocumented virtual-urban legend that tells of a player breaking communication lines in order to allow cross-faction trading (before an expansion made such things possible). The tale states that the player's actions caused such rampant inflation that Blizzard had to intervene and reset the server and all auction house prices. They then permanently banned the offending player. There is, however, no evidence that such an event took place. I believe that the legend, as related to me in the early days of my forays of auction house trading, serves as an anecdote that highlights the players' hyperawareness of the constructedness and fragility of the *WoW* economic system, but also of their confidence in the "free market" principles of the game as secured by basic forms of regulation (similar to how the Federal Reserve secures the "freedom" of US markets).[49]

By placing the Medieval guild structure into what appears to be a liberal economic system, *WoW*'s designers have created the social support of welfare and focus on the individual citizen that was a marker of 20th century liberalism. However, *WoW* has removed the onus of digital-citizen support from the governing structure (Blizzard) and placed the responsibility for teaching, directing, and managing both social and

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[49] Recent updates to the game have introduced a Blizzard-created black market auction house. This market, which has incredibly high prices with no cap on bids, is effectively a way to remove excess gold in the game and correct the hyperinflation that *WoW* has experienced over the past seven years. Player reactions are mixed and, as in all governmentally mandated economic experiments, the market has taken longer to adjust than originally anticipated. (Battle.net forum. http://us.battle.net/wow/en/forum/topic/7593741732)

economic activity on the shoulders of guild leaders that are in fact players themselves—a move that mirrors the neoliberal removal of social welfare services from the government and into third sector agencies. Support from Blizzard as a governing entity comes in the form of an inefficient customer support system that handles only Terms of Service issues, code glitches, and hacks in the game; social governance online lays primarily in the hands of the guilds, though those guilds are a construct of the game's designers.

The neoliberal game space also lacks all but the most basic regulatory oversight in the auction house and relies on voluntary third sector bodies (guilds) to perform the support tasks that a progressive liberal government might assume. The guild effectively fills the gap created by a shortfall in Blizzard guidance through the game and the limits of individual player exploration as a method of gaining knowledge. It is the guild, then, that directs new players on either how to work within the marketplace. In the original release of the game and three of its subsequent expansions, Blizzard developers played no obvious role in the *WoW* marketplace. Players were free to buy and sell at will, though always within the monitorable code of the online Auction House and player-to-player trade transactions. However, the constant influx of new patches and expansions has expedited the cycle of obsolescence; better gear (and more difficult bosses requiring the acquisition of better gear) comes out on a regular basis. The savvy player must engage in near-constant economic activity in order to generate enough capital to keep his/her character up to date and able to purchase or pursue better armor and weapons. The playful state of consumption for consumption's sake defines the character as a capitalist citizen, and it is the citizen-as-consumer that marks this game not as progressively liberal,

but as neoliberal, as the player is only useful and valuable if he or she has self-invested via consumption.

The pervasiveness of economic (inter)action in *WoW* creates an atmosphere that often feels more like work than like play. As self-betterment and performance are measured more by the ability to consume conspicuously, players must dedicate a substantial portion of the game time to less interesting activities like "grinding", the act of repeating the same task over and over again in order to advance to new content, or "farming", the act of repeating the same action over and over again to obtain items or currency. When players discuss needing to grind or farm in order to achieve a goal, they generally speak/type the words with mild distaste. Grinding and farming are usually quite boring. Art historian Julian Stallabrass comments on the phenomenon as a method of character development through unrewarding labor practices. Growth is not simply the result of in-game experience, but rather it is the direct result of trade (89). Actions, then are interpreted not for their success in terms of personal growth and performance alone, but are arbitrated by whether they produce a desirable result (i.e.: obtaining new gear). Stallabrass summarizes this phenomenon thus:

> The player's performance is of course expressed as a numbered score, while objects when captured or destroyed may become, at the moment of their extinction, a floating number, an economic element. Each element of the game, each virtual being or object, acts as a commodity, placed in an extensive metonymic chain in which each link is defined only in relation to the others (90).

The bent toward capitalist consumption thus reduces experience to numerically valued component parts. The joy of defeating a high level boss or of accomplishing something new becomes a question of whether you will receive a piece of gear that can be either worn or sold; some of a player's joy in the game evaporates when the entirety of the world is commoditized. This particular system then shapes player expectations of play and guides their behaviors to becoming model leisure-consumers--an act that is itself a performance of white masculinity, which I will explore in greater depth later in this chapter. The game naturalizes capitalist conduct to the point where the boring seems not so much pleasurable as it seems necessary to achieve an affective reward; we might argue, then, that *WoW* trains menial and mindless economic production for ephemeral rewards.

However, the in-game goods and gold are not the only form of economy that we need to examine in *WoW*. The game certainly relies on its in-game economy to keep the player engaged with the game world, but we cannot forget that players are paying for this privilege *and* performing immaterial labor at the same time. Julian Kucklich states that the process of consumer (subject/user) to government (service provider) is laid bare in virtual worlds, allowing us to glimpse the "mercantile roots of citizenship". Users in these spaces pay the government to package the goods security, economic stability, a consistent gameworld in the form of mythology, ideology, and history. He argues that the "content" of the virtual world is a McGuffin for the actual content of governmentality. The fantasy creatures, engrossing narrative, and stunning game art distract the player from the fact that the game is constantly and persistently shaping the player's behavior. He argues that

what players pay for in game is as much the ability to log onto a social space. He posits that MMOs are social factories in which the social fabric of the game is shot through with the ideology of economic production as guilds support the game's consumer focus. I would add that the guild-as-social-space generates the true value of the game. As much fun as running through a dungeon can be, the reason I (and many of the men and (particularly) women I interviewed returned to the game time and again. The social space creates cultural value; this is not something that can be animated or plotted, but relies solely on the players. The social dynamic of the game becomes the primary reason players log on. They pay for the privilege of cohabitating the same virtual space which is itself a naturalization of these economic conducts. Rewards are only the affective boost one receives when acquiring a new piece of gear, but the sense of social belonging that is itself contingent on such economic cooperation.

Leisure and the Meritocracy

WoW's more neoliberal tendencies, which exist in tandem and in tension with both its progressive liberal and distinctly medieval tendencies, are built on a premise that all players are created equal. As all players start with the same resources and disadvantages (level 1, remote starting area, no money, random NPC delivering quests, and a tutorial on game mechanics), we might assume that Blizzard believes that each player has the same potential for success within the game. However, I argue that because the game's premise focuses less on story and more on capitalist production, the same issues that plague economic neoliberalism in the real-world also plague the digital space. The problem with

the maxim that "working hard" (playing hard?) would allow any player to succeed in the game is that it is based on the assumption that real-world inequality will not translate to the digital space. This simply isn't true.

The myth of meritocracy, according to according to sociologists Stephen McNamee and Robert Miller, is one that is predicated not on what "is" but on the belief that the system is "fair" and works (4). The ideology of meritocracy, they state, presents inequality as a fair and necessary result of the system. The meritocracy myth states that every individual has an equal (or at least adequate) chance to succeed and that, therefore, success is due entirely to individual merit. The system works because "it provides individual incentive to achieve that is good for society as a whole; that is, those who are the most talented, the hardest working, and the most virtuous get and *should get* the most rewards" (4). The philosophy of American meritocracy is that one gets out of it what one puts into it, and therefore those who fail to gain from the system have only themselves to blame. Most scholars, however, and McNamee and Miller in particular recognize meritocracy for the myth that it is: a system that ignores systemic inequality (race, gender, class inequalities) and legitimizes generally false claims that such inequality is the result of laziness rather than a societal predisposition that denies opportunities for advancement to minorities.

I open with this description of meritocracy because *World of Warcraft*--and indeed every MMO currently on the market--has built its system on the concept of a meritocracy. Of all potential societies, the virtual world has perhaps the best potential for enacting the myth as (virtual) reality. Both game developers and players assume that s/he

who works hardest and plays longest will likely be the best at the game, ignoring questions of access or difference. *WoW* therefore presents itself as an absolute meritocracy, though this it is not one in fact as we shall see. While on the surface all players have equal potential for success, this does not allow for differences in learning style/speed, ability to reliably access the game on high speed internet, ability to pay for the game, and having leisure time to spend in a pursuit with no tangible rewards. The actual player population is incredibly diverse, with different capabilities, positionalities, educations, and cultural ideals; the meritocracy model ignores these differences much as it does in contemporary society. This puts those who don't conform to the game's ideals (white, affluent, educated, male, heterosexual, etc) at a disadvantage; they are less able to compete economically--which is a necessity in the guild structure. The game removed race from the equation in one sense (see Ch 2), but not on the level of the actual player. The game has no ability to deal with the real world effects of institutional racism and its consequential restrictions. Here I use the term institutional racism to refer to the structural barriers to full participation in *WoW*—specifically lack of access to education, income or leisure time. This choice has created a space where meritocracy *seems* to exist, but the price of success is the adoption of practices that are raced, classed, and gendered. In particular, players must behave as white, male capitalists in order to succeed economically--which often amounts to succeeding at all.

One of the methods through which *WoW* marks itself as middle-classed and male is through the assumption that a player has enough leisure time to not only play the game, but to do the research it takes to play the game as an efficient capitalist. "Leisure", which

I define as personal time in which a player does not have waged work or pressing household duties to attend to, is a societal concept that gained momentum in the 19th and 20th century as a defining factor of the white middle-class. Leisure activities are generally non-productive and performed by those with the privilege of free time. According to 19th century economist and sociologist Thorstein Veblen, the leisure class evolved out of those who the "superior classes" within a given society, who were honored by exemption from the less savory (and more physical) forms of labor (1) These elevated individuals therefor had the time to develop leisure pursuits including waging war and hunting, while the less elevated or the vanquished farm or gather.

Veblen wrote that the mechanization and automation of labor in American society would lead to a display of conspicuous leisure amongst the elevated classes as a demonstration of their position, but much of his work applies to *WoW* and the assumed equality between payers (29). The players I spoke with fall into two categories of work type: the middle class and the working class. This is by no means unusual as guilds tend to be self-selecting. Players with similar classes, capabilities, backgrounds and conducts tend to gravitate toward guilds of like-minded people; those who don't blend into the group tend to leave of their own accord (though a few are ousted), and thus most guild socially segregate without naming it as such. Most of the players I interviewed (and about half of my guild group) work in a service industry (thereby engaging in immaterial labor in their work lives). In fact, many were human resources workers, white collar software and hardware engineers, mid-level managers in small businesses, and security experts with an affinity for computers. We should note, however, that white collar, middle class

workers composed only part of my guild; many were third shift workers employed by food processing plants, machine factories, or in other manufacturing facilities. They worked considerably longer hours for less pay and, unlike many of the information systems workers, did not have the ability to play at during their work hours. As a result, these players had to make a temporal and financial investment in the game that was considerably greater than the service industry workers, often at the expense of time spent with children, engaging in other entertainments, or external social experiences. While the bar to game entry was set quite low, research and self-improvement came more easily to those who were more educated or had more access to leisure time. As a result, players with sufficient leisure time tended to be the most informed about the game. As I have already intimated, many of them played the game on a laptop during working hours in order to maximize the farming and researching time (both activities that take relatively little focus and that can be paused if something comes up at work). The vast of majority of these players were also white.

Many of the players who had more leisure time (or more flexible work-time) supplemented the knowledge base of the other players--though this act was often done begrudgingly if such players felt that you should be willing/able to do this on your own. I.e.: More experienced players offered me advice willingly during the first year that I played as part of the guild, but later did so only begrudgingly (or scathingly) because they felt that I should have the time to research and improve on my own as I was a unmarried, childless, part-time worker. My job as a teaching assistant was only part time; my work as a graduate student (the bulk of my work) was not considered relevant to the discussion

(many players assumed that graduate student workloads are similar to those of undergraduate students). The same biases were not expressed (to my knowledge) to other, less skilled guild members who cared for small children or worked full time or multiple jobs. Because my privilege was out in the open for all to see, guild leadership eventually viewed me as unworthy of the type of assistance I had received as a newer player. Guild leaders and other elite players often implied that any stalling in my character's advancement was, I believe, viewed as the result of my own laziness rather than a lack of leisure time. However, those without privilege suffer a different form of discrimination. Players who receive assistance in the form of currency, mini-lessons on efficiency, or protection during quests/dungeons runs are placed in the position of dependent. Both they and the players helping them view their success as depending on favors, condescension, and the largess of their superiors within the guild. They have to continually reshape their performance of identity to be "worthy" of help by wearing their real-life social subordinancy in a space that should, in theory, free them from such constraints. Additionally, if they do advance thanks to the help of others, they will likely receive no future assistance to compensate them for the real-life circumstances that made them "lesser" players to begin with.

Like the economic system of *WoW*, neither players nor game directly reference the assumption of meritocracy. However, players assume that either laziness or stupidity are the root causes of lack of in-game success. In my own experience, guild leaders were willing and able to help me adjust to the ever-changing role of a warlock in a raid group, but patches to the game made it increasingly difficult to optimize my character. After

each patch that made an alteration to how damage was calculated or how some of my spells worked, I would ask for help in reconfiguring my spells. Initially, my guild leader (who played a warlock as an alternate character) was keen to help me with my configuration, but eventually became impatient with my reliance on his help and encouraged me to research the changes on my own. The unspoken implication of his move was that in order to play with the other elite members of the guild, I needed to be able to spend some of my spare time researching and experimenting with new character configurations.

This "work your way to the top" philosophy of the game assumes that first, I had the leisure time to research and experiment with my character's spell specialization, second, that I knew of and had access to player research published online, and third that I understood the game well enough to draw conclusions on what character alterations would be best. As a single woman with flexible work hours, I had the ability to spend time experimenting with my character; others were not so lucky and were therefore not able to maintain membership amongst the more elite players of the guild (or, if they did, had considerable help with their characters beyond proffered advice). Karl Spracklen states that "leisure is a form and space where inequalities of power are refracted through social structures and cultural power is at work making constructions of whiteness unproblematic" (1). I would agree that the game's adherence to a meritocracy model ignores inequalities between players such as questions of access, of adequate leisure time, of the ability to pay a regular subscription fee, or of the ability to pay to maintain a working computer (my own financial limitations prevented me from playing for several

weeks running due to my inability to pay for a new motherboard for several weeks). Many of the players I interviewed took unwilling breaks from the game due to an inability to pay for their subscription until the next payday; SnappySam, a single mother who agreed to an interview after a late-night dungeon run, informed me that her circumstances made for a very different gaming experience than mine.

Kimi: Is *WoW* your first MMO? Or do you play other games?

SnappySam: I played *EverQuest* with my husband way back, but I was never that serious about it. *WoW* is really my only form of entertainment. I don't go out at night because I can't afford a sitter, but I can usually play for a few hours after I put my daughter to bed. But things are tight, you know? If her dad is late with the child support payment, I have to pick up the slack and make sure that she's taken care of. Sometimes that means that I don't have enough room on my credit card to pay for my subscription. I mean, I'm paying more for my subscription because I do month to month,[50] but I can't always guarantee that I'm going to be able to afford it.

Kimi: What happens when you can't log on?

SnappySam: Well, I miss it obviously. I get pretty bored without it. We don't have cable, so I usually just end up cleaning the house. My house is lots cleaner when I'm not playing!

Kimi: Does your guild miss you?

[50] Month to month subscriptions cost $14.99 month, but are billed twelve times a year. The most inexpensive subscription is a 6 month term which bills $77.94 twice a year. This is $2.00 less than the month-to-month rate, but many players can't afford such a large subscription fee.

> **SnappySam**: Eh. Kinda, I guess. We're a big guild, so they don't really miss *me* so much as they miss my guild fees. All the level 80s have to chip in 100 gold a month. We get a warning if we don't, but if I'm not online I won't see the warning mail. Plus when I'm not online I lose my spot in our raiding group. I'm still on the wait list to get back in after the last time I lost access, which is why I'm in LFG now instead of Heroic Naxx.[51] (Interview September 4, 2012)

SnappySam's gaming experience was not only interrupted by real-life economic struggles, but her social standing within her guild regressed. In large, dedicated raiding guilds, spots on the 10 or 25 man raiding teams are often difficult to acquire. Many guilds have a raiding group of dedicated players and a wait list of equally qualified, but "less reliable" players—a spot which SnappySam was forced to occupy due to her economic circumstances.[52]

WoW, then, inadvertently justifies in-game inequality through the unspoken, but well-known myth of American meritocracy: if a player cannot earn gold efficiently, cannot play a character efficiently, or cannot reach end-game material effectively, players (and likely developers) would argue that the player simply is not trying hard enough. While it may be true that the players who work hardest at playing the game *deserve* the rewards they receive for their efforts, the presence of the meritocracy myth sheds light on

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[51] LFG (Looking for Group) is a service that matches random players so that they might enter dungeons with a minim player setting. I met SnappySam through the LFG service and interviewed her after a five-man dungeon run. Naxx refers to the raiding dungeon Naxxramas run on Heroic level (more difficult), a 25 person raid.

[52] This issue has been partially remedied by the advent of the LFR tool in the game, which allows you to join a random raid. However, these groups are largely unpracticed and under-qualified, so participation in a random raid-group usually yields no in-game rewards. As raid runs are limited to one-per-week, participation in a random raid also prevents a player from running the dungeon with her own guild should a spot open up.

the fact that the continual cycle of consumption is itself an exclusionary practice. Players who wish to participate must conform to white, male capitalist modes of behavior in order to reap the rewards of their investment in the game, often by sacrificing the performance of their identity. As I stated in Chapter 2, the social climate of the guild often acts as a barrier to full participation for some of its members. Players who do not behave or socialize appropriately experience very real consequences within the social space. The guild serves as a social, disciplinary body (whether it views itself as such is another story) that both trains behaviors and trains players for efficiency and success online.

Trained to Succeed

World of Warcraft's is an inherently competitive space. Players are not only striving to create capital and acquire digital artifacts; they strive to consume conspicuously. Their phrase "keeping up with the Joneses" has never felt more apt than it does in *WoW* as one player's success generally drives others to match or outstrip his/her accomplishment. The guild's social welfare policy only extends so far. However, the obsessive focus on toward capitalist consumption reduces the gaming experience to a numbers game where players are less concerned with achievement and more concerned with the level of their gear. The joy of defeating a high level boss or of exploring a new territory becomes a question of whether you will receive a piece of gear that can be either worn or sold. This particular system then shapes player expectations of play and guides their behaviors to becoming model leisure-consumers--an act that is itself a performance

of white masculinity. As anthropologist Lisa Anderson-Levy explains, the "ability to afford expensive goods and services is one element in the construction of whiteness" while conspicuous consumption is a classed method of differentiating between the haves and have-nots (183). I would argue that conspicuous consumption within the digital space is serves as a representational display of the hard work one has put into the game. More specifically, a player's ability to acquire digital goods stands as a conspicuous marker of not only their ability to work hard, but their ability to self-invest and gather cultural capital. Players understand that those with high-level gear have invested a great deal of time into both playing the game and into building a social circle that can help them attack high-level challenges.

Through a focus on a consumer culture that, in many ways, mirrors aspects of our contemporary economic structures, *WoW* trains players to accede to and perform the behaviors and codes of neoliberal capitalism in order to receive the validation of advancement. The game relies on the guild as a de facto overseer, tasking each group with teaching players what conduct is acceptable, what conduct will help them succeed, and what conduct will result in stagnation or social rejection. The conduct that will help a player succeed depends on a body of knowledge, ideologies, and norms that have been constructed over the past two centuries of US history. In short, the developers of *WoW*--most of whom are white men, if their public appearances are any indication--have created a game where economic conduct relies on the knowledge of systems that are historically raced and gendered.

As I have posited in the previous chapters, no player comes to the game with a clean slate but rather a social identity that is already raced, gendered, and classed. Despite the anonymous nature of the game, these identity markers become apparent when players interact with one another in guild chat rooms. Therefore, players experience the training process of "acceptable" online behavior differently. Guilds train players to conduct themselves within white/male behavioral norms, but as a woman in the online space I often found myself at odds with correct online conduct. Kucklich posits that "it is possible to draw a parallel from the way families become instruments of population management to the way player communities are used for the organization of virtual worlds, and it is also possible to regard the labor of play laborers as a form of biopolitical labor that appears to fulfill primarily an economic function but which also creates cultural capital" (*Governmentality* 344). Membership in a guild indicates an understanding that the group will self-impose both rights and restrictions upon acceptable behavior online. Many of those restrictions take the form of casually framed rules and regulations. My guild's rules included only one commandment: "Don't be a jerk. We're all family here." The rule covered a variety of evils, but the reality was that if no one complained, no one corrected the behavior. This is not to say that there was no leadership—far from it. When several female players approached a guild leader about the repeated use of the phrase "Getting raped" to refer to a battleground loss, he quickly instituted a policy stating that the phrase wasn't welcome. However, the phrase "getting raped" was so ingrained into the player culture that many of the players I gamed with (both male and female) continued to use it. Initially, we (the women who had campaigned for the phrase to be

banned) politely corrected players who made use of the term. Over time, however, the male players (including our guild leader) complained that we were policing the term too severely and that our corrective behavior was disrupting the playful space of the guild. The language ban stayed in place, but it became unenforceable. In this way, our guild leader unintentionally took a positive and empowering moment for the women in the guild and used it to demonstrate our subordinate status within the game. He did not alter the offensive behaviors of the guild's male population, but rather altered the behavior of its female population through his inaction and, later, correction of our commitment to eradicating a sexually threatening phrase from the guild's lexicon. Our guild leader's attempts to maintain a peaceful and fun gaming environment reinforced the fact that, as women, we were not in the position to police the (assumed) predominantly male population of the game, a fact that had not been made entirely clear (to either the our guild leader or other players) at that point in time.)

WoW, however, is not a predominantly male game and has not been since its initial launch. As I have indicated, no official census numbers exist, but if even 30% of the population is female (Yee 2007), the number of women in the game is anything but insignificant. It is *WoW*'s hypermasculine encoding, however that render women unable to effectively police in *World of Warcraft*. [53] The same inability to police online behavior, however, applies to those who would protest the use of racial slurs in the online

[53] I draw this conclusion from my own experience of *World of Warcraft*. Reports form interviewee DevilCakes refute this conclusion, though she has admitted that she and her guild mates deliberately formed a heavily female-led, open guild environment with a stringent no-abuse policy.

space; as *WoW* is a space of whiteness, it would see that only those who are white and male have the ability to police the behaviors of other white, male players.

Reflection upon my time as an active player and prominent guild member has made me realize that such reversals were a common part of guild life. My ethnographic accounts are colored by language of both ambition and fear; in particular, I recall my early raid attempts and my desire to not just perform as well as everyone else, but to perform *better* than everyone else. While I am naturally competitive, I believe that this desire is rooted in a deeper issue of gender performativity within the game. As a traditionally male space, my presence in *WoW* required that I outperform my male peers in order to gain a measure of respect from other members of the raiding party. This meant attending raids on time and prepared for all eventualities. While other (male) members of the raiding party regularly arrived late and wearing the wrong armor set, I understood without being told that doing so as a female would lead to assumptions about my own capabilities as a player. Likewise, any repetition of the same mistake from week to week could potentially lead to being dropped from the raid group. While it was never spoken out loud, I understood that my acceptance as a member of the most elite players of the guild was precarious because a) I am female and b) I had no male guild member (husband or boyfriend) to protect me from the other men in the guild. As an "unprotected" and "unclaimed" female guild member, guild leaders could effectively make an example of my behaviors to the rest of the guild without fear of reprisal from a partner. I found that my behavior was a frequent source of conflict and that the guild acted collectively to reshape my performance of identity online.

Conclusion

In one of the many notes to instructors in Baron Baden-Powell's 1908 edition of *Scouting for Boys*, the Scoutmaster encourages his largely untrained instructors to "keep before your mind in all your teaching that the whole ulterior object of this scheme is to form character in the boys--to make them manly, good citizens[...] We want to save lads from drifting into this class of loafer who swells the ranks of unemployment" (Baden-Powell 361-62). The goal of the scouting was clearly defined from the beginning of the movement: take young, urban boys and turn them into men who will be useful laborers in the economy. The BSA sought to teach boys the values of Christianity, upright behavior, observation, kindness, useful employment, strength of body, and strength of character before releasing them into the greater world. In short, teach boys how to be upstanding *white* men who are leaders in a US-dominated, international world and do so by using the pedagogical methods of competition and exploration.

World of Warcraft's method of teaching also relies on competition and exploration, but its ultimate goals are less well-defined than Baden-Powell's anecdote-filled, preaching tome on what constitutes a man of character. My analysis of the *World of Warcraft* economic imaginary attempted to isolate not only the goals of *WoW* as a learning environment, but to analyze the pedagogies behind them. *WoW* presents itself as a complicated palimpsest of economic behavior and systems, but the most prominent facet of this imaginary is equation between consumption and success. Continual, conspicuous consumption forms the backbone of a player's and a guild's actions,

overshadowing the positive qualities of community support and general welfare emphasized in most guild manifests.

The focus on consumption and acquisition has several results. First, the continual need to acquire and consume leads to player burnout on a regular basis. I have taken several extended (months long) breaks from the game out of a desire to remove myself from this endless cycle of intangible achievement. I have found, as have many others, that continual grinding and farming leads to boredom with the game as a whole--a sad statement considering the expansiveness of this game world. I believe that such digital ennui comes from the loss of a sense of wonder and adventure that no amount of in-game gold or fantastic armor seems able to recapture. Second, in order for players to gain social acceptance and, thus, economic success in the game, they must perform within the parameters of white, heterosexual male identity politics--even if their real-world identity noticeably deviates from this mould. Such performances indicate that players who do not conduct themselves within these parameters never feel fully at home within the digital space and must therefore monitor and self-correct what feel like natural behaviors in the real world whenever they are online. Players unwittingly participate in a form of transactional pedagogy, learning that rules in the online space (much as they are in the real world) have not been applied to every player equally. While some players have the power to police and to redirect behaviors both in the virtual-active realm and the social realm, many others--generally women and those who do not acquiesce to a standardized performance of white, hypermasculine "locker room mentality"—lack the ability to police behaviors in that space.

The Sacrosanct Treehouse: *World of Warcraft* and the Shifting Sands of Gaming Culture

It's really sad and says a lot about the current state of equality in Wow [sic] *when I can consider myself one of the "lucky ones" to have avoided any* extreme *cases of harassment when I hear about it all the time. [Emphasis in original.]*

Bowan, Battle.net Forum

September 9, 2014

It is a commonly known fact that when charting unexplored territories and waters, Medieval cartographers placed dragons or sea serpeants over the unknown area. *Hc Svnt Dracones*, literally "here are dragons", marked areas of danger both real and imaginary. In many ways, it feels appropriate to brand this project with a title that references this practice, both to call attention the Medieval overtones (and, yes, the dragons) of *World of Warcraft* but to mark the precariousness of failing to perform within the often unnamed parameters of race and gender identity within the digital space. In a sandbox world where players should be able to reinvent themselves without threat or fear, the game and its players mould and police player behaviors in order to maintain *WoW* as a space of serious fun. Threats to that fun in the form of criticism of the game's race war, its representation of Otherness, or its often misogynist communities exposes the player to community censure, embarrassing correction, and outright exile. Yes: Here Be Dragons.

World of Warcraft certainly struggles with maintaining a welcoming presence for players whose identities do not fit the target player population stereotype, but it is not the only digital space that fumbles its attempts to accept women, homosexuals, or Others.

Video gaming culture as a whole struggles to accept those who outspokenly identify as "different" from the (perceived) average gamer, a fact that has become more evident in the last few weeks of my writing of this dissertation. Gamers, a subset of society at large that rarely receives positive media attention, recently made headline news with the popularization of the Twitter tag #Gamergate. The phenomenon is a so-called conspiracy that claims to want to root out corruption in the games journalism industry by terrorizing outspoken feminist figures in the video game industry and attacking "Social Justice Warriors," a pejorative that lambasts those who decry misogynist or racist activity in games and their associated (and largely digital) social spaces. Those public figures who are so unfortunate as to appear on the radar of "average gamer" types who wish to resist cries for change within the industry are often suffused with anonymous, yet credible death and rape threats, harassment of their families and supporters, digital attacks from hackers, and the exposure of personal information and financial documents on the world wide web (an activity known as "doxxing").

Online opinions on the matter assume that a small subset of gamers is simply immature and unenlightened, but games critic and journalist Leigh Alexander has theorized that these fractious social media conflicts point to an underlying discomfort with the shifting demographics of the gaming population and the fact that new games stress the importance of community and culture in games over their entertainment/skill building value. She states:

> As video games unshackle from old constraints, traditional fans double down on keeping the treehouse sacrosanct. The tension between "games as a product" and

> "games as a culture" is visible within these online controversies as everyone invested in the industry watches to see which will "win". (Alexander)

Alexander's Time Magazine piece theorizes that as the video game industry changes and embraces players that do not fit the young, white male target audience the golden age of gaming, this particular population of gamers struggles against a perceived threat that they will no longer be a "defined 'demographic' who must be catered to explicitly." They will instead become a part of a large and varied culture of gamers, each seeking games that not only represent diverse identities but also speak to their interests and pursuits.

Threats against feminist game developers and reviewers such as Zoe Quinn (developer, *Depression Quest*), Brianna Wu (female independent game developer and company CEO), Anita Sarkeesian (feminist game critic and vlogger), and Leigh Alexander (critic and reviewer) and elaborate plots to silence the "Social Justice Warriors" (SJWs) indicate that games don't just train conduct within the game space--they shape behaviors in gaming culture itself. Leigh Alexander has posited "the bizarre conspiracy theories circulating online [...] feel something like a video game in and of itself. The GamerGate crusaders lea to employ legal terminology like fancy weapons they are clearly confused about how to wield." Indeed, the methods that objecting gamers have employed to attack any community member who attempts to change gaming culture as a whole feel like moves in an online game--online opinion pieces generate interest which some misread as collusion an attempt to silence the rapidly diminishing (young, white, male) majority of the gaming population. They, in turn, hack, doxx, and recruit black hat programmers to harass the SJWs of the gaming community. These gaming activists also

refuse to be silenced, and the cycle begins again. I believe what we have witnessed in August and September 2014 is a transfer of the policing conducts allowed within digital gaming spaces such as *WoW* into the real world via Twitter, 4Chan, Reddit, and other social media sites. Players attitudes are shaped within a virtual space that validates and mythologizes the role of the white, male, heterosexual hero; *WoW* and many other games (other MMOs and highly militant games with prominent social components such as Call of Duty, Halo, and Battlefield) enable players to police deviate behaviors in the game's social communities. I believe the similarity between a game's social community and a Twitter debate or forum thread provides a natural space in which the player can extend the conducts s/he has learned and practiced online. *World of Warcraft*, then, serves as an example of how these conducts develop in the online space and the dangers of immersing ourselves within games without attending to how our own behavior is shaped by those spaces. Here be dragons.

Representation in Play

When I first began this project, I initially thought that the bulk of my research would center on the ways *World of Warcraft* represents Otherness in the digital space. I was not entirely incorrect in this assumption; racial representation is certainly an important component of my research. However, as I researched and wrote, I discovered that essentialized representations of both Otherness *and* of whiteness are only components of the game's ability to construct the digital world as a space of whiteness. My initial forays into the research proposed only to look at the problematic

representations of Otherness, failing at first to recognize these codified avatars' roles in defining both their white enemies and the environments they inhabit as spaces that reify a larger and all-too-familiar space of white superiority.

I understood from the beginning that the game's narrative would play an important role in my analysis, but I had not realized that a more thorough analysis would shift my understanding of the game world that I had inhabited for seven years. I came to the *Warcraft* universe through the MMO, *World of Warcraft*, rather than through its three precursors (*Warcraft*s *I, II* and *III*), and was thus ignorant of the complex historical backstory of the game's Orc population. I was not until I began to read through the extensive online histories of the game that I discovered that *WoW*'s narrative reverses the familiar story of white colonization of the West, placing the white population of the game at the center of the story as the victims of militant invasion rather than the perpetrators of colonizing events. It was this shift in colonial ideology that led me to theorize that *WoW* hosts an environment that grants players permission to ignore or even excuse the realities of real-world colonial and racial trauma.

Analyzing *WoW* through as a space of assumed post-raciality provided some insight into how the game space obfuscates surface racial tensions by hiding it beneath a layer of fantasy. The game retains a level of deniability by placing white, human characters in opposition to non-human, green skinned characters, though in fact all this act does is further reify 19th century tropes of non-white Others as less-than-human, bestial creatures motivated by baser desires. At every turn, then, *WoW* encourages the players to embrace a "white habitus", accepting that the outmoded racial ideologies that

color the space rightfully identify non-human, non-white characters as lesser beings. While seemingly harmless in the online space (a fact that I refute in chapter 3), naturalizing a state of being that encourages the blind acceptance of a structure of (racial) feeling that predates the Civil Rights era by decades.

It would be interesting to know whether these concerns were a part of initial game concept. *WoW*'s is an ever-changing digital space and the racial divisions between the Horde and the Alliance are no longer as clearly defined as they once were. The game's developers have experimented with placing Othered characters in the Alliance ranks (the introduction of the Punjabi-coded Draenai race in 2006) and white-coded characters in the Horde (the pale skinned, drug addicted Blood Elves). They have likewise introduced a race that is permitted to *choose* its faction at level 10 (the Chinese coded Pandaren, who are literally chubby, martial panda bears). The division between the factions is a point of public debate amongst game reviewers and within Blizzard's Battle.net forums. I question how deliberate this division was when initially conceived and whether the designers, who have access to customer complaints and game census metrics that I do not, may use these factors to deliberately shape player conduct online. While many game use warring racial dynamics to encourage player empathy with their character (I'm thinking of particular in war-based first-person shooters) *WoW* is the most prominent MMO to make use of such an obviously divisive in-game racial system. The game developers' decision to use race as the central issue of conflict within *WoW* is particularly interesting given that the game was in active development during the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and released just 38 months after that

event. A popular game that asks players to enact violence on racially divided groups, even in a digital landscape, is in many ways rehearsing the hardening of racial lines within the American military that has authorized the domestication of white militancy in the wake of the 9/11 attacks.

Embodiment in Play

This chapter allowed me to work through and to clarify the various terms that describe the online experience. While there is a significant body of scholarship available that discusses immersion, embodiment, and identity, the terms often seem to be conflated or confused. It was necessary to define each succinctly so that I could understand the individual components of player experience and illustrate how each of these components works with the others to create a complete experience. Players embody virtual avatars, an act that describes the naturalization of movement and of the digital environment, while simultaneously building multiple identities that guide them through the virtual-active space and the social realm. While players themselves do not tend to think of the components of the game as varying modes of interaction and immersion, I have found it important to understand how the moving through multiple identities and embodied action of varying intensities allows for the outmoded racial structures of feeling that I referred to in Chapter 2 to move from game then to and *through* the player.

My focus on the *interaction continuum* has proved useful for separating the realms that players inhabit online from the roles that they assume in the digital space. Discussing the overlap between the virtual spaces allowed for me to explore in detail how

ideologies from one space can seep into another. In particular, I was able to address the bi-directional flow of these ideologies from the real into the virtual and back again. While I had not anticipated applying the interaction continuum and flow of ideologies beyond *WoW,* I have been able to use it to explain, at least in part, the #GamerGate phenomenon as a shift in gaming culture and to apply my theory of the strict parameters of player performance outside of the limited site of my game.

Analyzing *WoW* through the lens of immersion theory allowed me to understand the various ways in which players sink into the world of the game. I have described immersion as the merging of two experiences: transporting the player to a place and allowing them to feel as if they are actually present in Azeroth, and the act of being drawn into the game so deeply that awareness of anything external to the game disappears. The sense of being lost within the world of *WoW* is a part of the permission-granting process that allows players to conduct themselves as a part of that racial structure of feeling without conscious guilt.

Acquiescence in Play

I am not the first scholar, nor will I be the last, to recognize the importance of in-game economic systems within MMOs. The systems within these games are, perhaps, one of the most fascinating and useful aspects of synthetic worlds as they allow designers to model economic systems and test them in a largely harmless, real-time, operating population. Games such as the space-based game *Eve Online* even employ full-time economists to analyze the effectiveness of market adjustments and the effects of the in-

game destruction of digital goods in large battles. My contribution to this growing subgenre of research work has been to focus on how the economic system within *WoW* is informed by several historical systems and how each of those systems shapes player conduct in turn.

I initially thought that my analysis of the economic and achievement systems of *WoW* would center on the training and badge systems of the Boy Scouts of America. The organization served as a useful framework for my discussion of the *WoW,* but did not, in the end, serve as the foundation of my research into the effects of economic achievement on player conduct. In the process of researching this chapter, I discovered that *WoW* frames itself as a bootstrap-workspace, a meritocracy that grants all players equal opportunity to advance within the digital world. However, after analyzing the effects of embodying a racial Other, performing whiteness or acquiescing to performances of whiteness, and the subsequent policing of whiteness in the digital space, the surface representation of *WoW* as a meritocracy and space of equal economic opportunity rings false. I came to realize that the Blizzard developers either ignored or failed to account for the very real limitations of Othered players to engage in practices of leisure or financially invest their very real money into the game. This results in a system of welfare and partnership within the guild that forces less-frequent/able players to perform their very real subordinancy within the digital space in order to be deemed "worthy" of the help of others. Without this performance, less able players are unable to succeed within the game as they are unable to fully meet the game's demands that players adhere to a white, capitalist mode of interaction.

This raises some serious questions about whether *WoW* serves as a form of neo-colonial pedagogy for players who do not necessarily participate in such real-world systems in their home countries. Would a player in China or in Russia (whose economic systems, I recognize, now bear striking similarities to our own despite historic differences) therefore become trained in white, capitalist modes of economic production simply by playing *WoW?* Are the teenagers who engage in this game within our own country naturalizing these systems through the game? I am particularly interested in how *WoW*'s developers have created a system that makes the tediousness of farming and grinding seem like a necessary component of play in order to get to the "fun" parts of the game. Players are asked to perform digital labor that isn't terribly interesting or fun in order to economically support their character's ability to wage war and do battle. These tedious behaviors extend to related game-activities in the real world, where players perform the immaterial labor of gathering, organizing, and disseminating strategy guides, histories, and recommendations for improving player efficacy online. This labor is entirely player-supported, but serves to supplement the experience of many more players online. Game theorist and activist Jane McGonigal attests that this type of cooperative and supportive player activity could, if redirected into games that *create* change, alter the world for the better. However, I question whether games as they currently stand are teaching players not only to revere and adhere to the tenets of Western capitalism, but to understand cooperative play/bor as a method for self-advancement above all else.

Ethical Gaming?

My discussions of *World of Warcraft* have necessarily relied on my participation in US-based guilds on Western servers; however, *WoW* is a world-wide phenomenon. My project therefore could not address the game's effect on non-Western players. Each of my chapters supports my claim that *WoW* serves as a pedagogical space that teaches players to perform as ideal citizens in the online space by embracing a troubling racial narrative, embodying a racial Other while performing violent and divisive attacks against other digital racial groups. However, if we think of *WoW* as a space of identity formation, particularly racial identity formation, I must question how its ideas translate in a non-Western space. I have attested that *WoW* reifies a feeling of white habitus within the game's target demographic while simultaneously forcing non-white players to interact with a game that surrounds them with white bodies, white ideologies, and players performing whiteness. Does it follow, then, that Chinese players perform whiteness online? Do they draw on antiquated racial and colonial tropes to form their own understanding of the game's narrative and, thus, empathize with their characters' plights? I imagine that the non-Western experience of *WoW* must differ drastically from that of US players; further research might reveal whether the game is an escapist space without racial undertones in other countries, or whether players read their own ideologies on a game that strives to sew discord between physically and culturally different bodies.

It seems important here to expand my conversation beyond *World of Warcraft* to the other games of its genre. While *WoW* has defined the MMO for the past decade, newer games are beginning to break from the model of a binary race war, easily

identifiable "evil", and problematic character representations to offer players a highly customizable experience with nuanced storylines. *Guild Wars II* (2012) is another fantasy-genre game that allows players almost complete freedom in designing their avatar--down to the smallest details of eye color, nose bridge width, and skin pigmentation--while offering them another sandbox world to explore without a war with other races. However, my own player experience in this space seems to mirror that of *WoW*--players still police those outspoken few who don't fit the mould of the "standard" gamer and punish those who fail to acquiesce to a space of masculine jocularity and white superiority. Is there a component at play here that shapes conduct similarly that I have failed to recognize? Or have players been so well trained through their experiences in other MMOs (usually *WoW)* that they simply carry those behaviors into a new gaming space? Has *WoW* shaped player conduct so thoroughly that other games will need to re-shape conduct in order to change the culture as a whole? It is my hope that my future research projects may attempt to answer these questions as I move my work into other digital spaces and look beyond the somewhat dated design of *WoW*.

It feels necessary to pause here and note that my conclusions about *WoW*'s ability to shape conduct have been largely negative since the effects I experienced online certainly were. I am not, however, a completely jaded gamer. I enjoyed the vast majority of my time as an active *WoW* player and still communicate with many of my former guild mates through social media. It is only through the process of research and writing about player experiences that I have begun to understand how the game and guild encouraged me to reshape my own conduct to adhere to the unspoken rules of the guild space. As an

active player, online conflict was an annoyance or a small heartbreak (depending on severity of the altercation), not a symptom of a deeper issue in need of examination. I would therefore conclude that while online role-playing spaces are worthy of analysis and could certainly stand a revision, most of players I interacted with never recognized the effects of the game's pedagogies. We might consider these games truly expert in building spaces of play (even non-fun play) that camouflage the systems that work within. This, I believe, is both the genius and the danger of player immersion within digital spaces. I question how or *if* games developers might create games that are more aware of their role in shaping players into citizens of the digital space *and* the world at large. If player conduct can pass into the real-world, might we consider it a game designer's responsibility to encode playtime with a social conscience?

Given my conclusions about *World of Warcraft*—that it is a space of white masculinity, that it perpetuates capitalist neoliberal behaviors under the guise of ludic altruism, that it teaches fantasy-coded racial discrimination that can easily translate to non-representational social-discrimination, and that it encourages the generation of intellectual capital through player labor—it seems logical to question why I enjoyed playing this game for seven years. This is not a question that I felt able to answer until I began writing the conclusion of this project. *WoW* hides its flaws in plain sight; the race war is there for all to see, not hidden beneath obfuscating rhetoric. The presence of fantasy tropes and of a style of play that is openly performative (role-play) lend the game a playful distance from the realities of discriminatory behavior in the real world. Perhaps I, and other players, reveled in the escape from the strictures of racial complexity in the

real world (though such an admission makes me cringe inwardly). Perhaps the playful nature of our online existences allowed us to simply ignore the more problematic structures of the game. I have, however, been unable to play the game since concluding this project. Its mechanics seem forced, its storyline too heavy-handed for serious engagement. I question whether exposing other players to the problems of the game's narrative would create a similar desire to change the nature of this particular synthetic world. Is it too much to hope that the gaming population could help shift how these games are created and maintained?

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